

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for December 25, 2011
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Matthew 1:18-21 and Luke 15:17-24

ONE MORE CANDLE FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

During our Advent season, the children lit candles for hope, peace, joy, and love. Last evening, we lit the center Advent candle for Jesus, the Christ whom God sent into our world, and this morning our Advent cross has been put away. There were no more candles to light. But I felt something missing and so took advantage of this year's coincidence of Sunday and Christmas Day to add one more candle for the particular avenue of God's grace about which I would like to speak with you this morning: the power of forgiveness.

It's a painful thing, forgiveness, and the more severely we need it, the more it hurts. I liken forgiveness to opening a festering wound and cleaning it out so it can heal. When I was a boy in sixth grade, I was tripped one day as we were running off the playground, and when I fell, my hand must have hit a shard of glass. It didn't hurt much. In fact, I did not even notice the wound until I heard some kids behind me in the hallway yelling about blood on the floor and turned to see who was bleeding. I was. What hurt came later when the doctor had to clean the cinders out of the rather deep cut in the heel of my hand, but for my hand to heal properly, the cinders had to come out. Forgiveness is not so much about escaping consequences as it is about cleaning wounds in people and relationships so healing can proceed without infection.

There is a movement called "restorative justice." I don't want to talk now about the movement as such or the organization, but I do want to suggest that we need the concept very badly in our world and perhaps in our own lives. Restorative justice stands in contrast to punitive justice, to the idea that justice is accomplished by punishment. I'm not suggesting that punishment has no place in life at all, but it seems to do a very poor job of changing people's minds and hearts, healing torn or broken relationships, and freeing people to become productive members of a family, community or society. Why then do so many people favor increasingly severe punishments, and why does the United States incarcerate more people per capita than any other western nation and yet still have so much crime?

I think the problem is that frustrated, angry, and frightened people see punishment as "doing something" about an offense and the only alternative as "doing nothing" about it. So, in people's minds, doing something is better than doing nothing about a wrong that has been committed. But if the something we do does not work, why do we think doing more of it will

work better? Now, I realize many factors enter into the equation of crime and punishment. People want revenge for harm done, especially if it has been done to someone they love or if it felt like an attack upon them or the security of their “kind” of people. There is also the very potent factor of racism in our society as well as some tendency toward immunity for the rich or popular that goes beyond even their having the means to hire the most effective attorneys. But these are social problems which I do not want to dismiss as unimportant – they are very important – but this morning I invite you to look with me more personally at the matter of forgiveness, which is central to Christian faith but neither well understood among believers nor well explained to the public.

It all seems too automatic, too mechanical. We confess our sins, and God forgives us. Just like that. We don’t even have to get specific about anything we’ve done, because Protestant Christianity in particular has generalized sin into something that clings to everything we think and do. Wanting to counter as strongly as possible the false notion that by doing good deeds we could earn God’s favor, we Protestants have inadvertently made sin a totality, covering everything good, bad, or indifferent. So, we have been told we have a problem too big to handle, too pervasive even to comprehend. We are utterly sinful. But having been told we have this gigantic problem we cannot solve or even fathom, we are then told that Jesus has solved it all for us – completely. All we have to do is accept his solution, and all is instantly made well with our souls.

I accept that I cannot achieve my own salvation, but I think I should somehow be a participant in the process of it. A mere change in my status is not good enough, not even if it gets me into heaven when I die. Doesn’t there need to be change in me and my life? Or have I simply been moved by a divine bookkeeping process from the lost column into the saved column?

The “born again” movement seeks, I think, to correct this problem of our seeing salvation as no more than a bookkeeper’s change in our eternal status. Something has to happen to us, for us, and in us – now. God’s love and mercy must change us, the way we live our lives and make choices, and the way we treat other people. Unfortunately, the idea of being “born again” simply got coopted into the whole status view, and so people started calling themselves “born-again Christians.” It’s as though God added another column to the ledger: lost, saved, and now “born again,” which seems to be sort of like super-saved.

Forgiveness is a matter of healing, and it needs to be a matter of healing for both the offender and the offended – the one who did the harm and those hurt by it, including the immediate victims and the community, small or large. What then does the gospel of Jesus Christ do for us? What has Jesus accomplished for us in the immediacy of our daily lives? What difference does his giving himself for us make on this side of the grave?

There is, I believe, a very big difference between a change in my status on the record and a change in context for my being and living day by day. It's the difference between telling an older orphaned child, "Someday you'll belong in a family," and actually adopting that child. Adoption does not change an older child in a moment, a day, or even a year – maybe not completely in a whole lifetime. But it certainly does change the context for that child's living, growing, relating to other people, understanding himself or herself, and making choices. What a difference it makes to be loved and to belong and so have people to love back! Such a change in context transforms everything in an ongoing process of realizing and responding to the new reality of being loved and being part of a family with a place that cannot be lost or taken away.

So, God's forgiveness begins for us as God's choice to welcome us home, but even in Jesus' parable of the two sons, the problem remains between the brothers and needs to be healed and fixed for the sake of both and for the sake of their father who loves them both. Forgiveness begins as God's love overrules our condition of being unfit to be called God's sons or daughters. God will not treat us as slaves but as free and deeply loved family members, who therefore need to work things out in our own minds and lives. Thus the work of healing and restoring begins, but within a context of acceptance and belonging, of respect, understanding, and freedom. This is not "happily ever after"; it's the start of healing that can at times be quite painful in order to be made real. The cinders must come out. Infection that has spread must be treated to its source.

Resentments may have to be put onto the table and dealt with. Fears may need to be acknowledged. All concerned must have their say in the process of restorative justice. The offenders must see the people they have hurt and hear their stories. God put a human face on angry, hurt, but still caring love – that's what we celebrate in Christmas. The healing of forgiveness requires that everyone involved be seen and treated as a real person with a human face. Forgiveness hurts because it exposes the harm as done to real people. So, it requires us to work toward the place where we want healing and not just revenge. Forgiveness isn't doing nothing about the offense and the harm done; it's God's way of doing something that engages all concerned in the process of healing. Neither the offender nor the harmed comes away unchanged, because both need healing. The harm done must be confronted and owned; we used to say, "Own up to it." Offender and victims must look into each other's human faces and share in the truth from all sides, but the goal is to heal and set free.

I asked the children to light another candle on this Christmas Day for the healing that comes from forgiveness. It's not for excusing or coddling. It's for working it out because all concerned matter very much to God. Amen.