

Southport Presbyterian Church
Rev. Jim Capps
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The Blessing of Forgiveness
I John 1:8-9; Colossians 3:13

Last weekend, I shared with you that this year I have had the privilege of going through two Kairos Prison Ministry weekends. One of them was in May in Maghaberry Prison in Northern Ireland and one was a couple of weeks ago in the Plainfield Correctional Institution.

On Fridays we spend time talking about the fact that all of us need to open up our lives to the Christ who wants to give us a second chance in life. In the morning on Saturday each of us is given a piece of rice paper and challenged throughout the day to think of people we need to forgive and write those persons' names on our paper. Throughout the day, I found myself along with the others taking out my paper and adding names including myself at the top.

Then in the last activity of the day we go quietly to the area designated as the chapel. In the front is a big bowl of water. For all who feel led to do so, each of us goes with our table family to the front and places our paper with the names on it in the water. It's a wonderful thing to see the rice paper dissolve and feel like we are given a fresh start.

For the prison participants, what comes next is very hard and yet, wonderfully helpful. We give each of them six homemade chocolate chip cookies, which many of you have helped us make. They are to take those cookies and give them to the person they need most to forgive there in prison. As you can imagine, there are some heart-warming stories of reconciliation the next day.

As long as I live I will not forget the forgiveness ceremony at Plainfield. 41 out of the 42 prison participants and each member of the team got up and prayerfully put their names in the bowl. One person who could not get up was a very influential leader of a gang there in the prison. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he stayed in his seat, unable to let go of the animosity he felt.

Finally, the leader of another gang, put his arm around him and they went up together and then embraced afterwards. It was a miraculous moment when he felt the blessing of forgiveness.

As I continue this series on the subject of "Blessings," I want us to look briefly at two passages that talk about blessing of forgiveness. First, we will look at the blessing of confessing our sins and experiencing the forgiveness which comes from Christ's death on a cross. Next, we will talk about the relief and reconciliation that can come when we extend forgiveness to another. Finally, Scott Brooks, a member of the SPC Family is going to share a story of the blessing of forgiveness.

Please read with me the revolutionary good news of forgiveness found in I John 1:8-9.

It is a marvelous blessing to experience God's forgiveness.

Most of us, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, good or bad, have no problem believing the truth that all of us have sinned. In verse 8, John wants to make certain to express that truth. There may have been some in his world who rationalized away their wrongdoing much like we can do today.

Paul states the universal situation of all of us well when he writes in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The "glory of God" is perfection. One of the

Greek words for sin is *harmartia*, which means “missing the mark.” It means not hitting the bull’s eye of the target. Jesus is the only person who has ever walked this earth who has not sinned.

If the “glory of God” or the expectation of our righteous God is perfection and we are all sinners who have missed His mark, we have a predicament. That’s exactly where Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, comes in. He died on a cruel cross so that you and I could be forgiven for our sins.

Just as all of us are sinners, so all of us are offered forgiveness. No verse in the Bible better describes how that forgiveness takes place than verse 9. John says, “If we confess our sins...” The word “confess” simply means “to agree with” God that we have fallen short of His standard of perfection.

“Confess” doesn’t mean that we plead with or beg God for forgiveness. “Confess” doesn’t mean that we try to bribe God by good works or giving money. “Confess” means simply agreeing with God specifically about what I have done that I know is wrong.

“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” The Greek word for “forgiveness” has the meaning of “to leave behind” or “to abandon.” God wants us to discard, leave behind, abandon those things we have done and live in a whole new way.

John goes one more step here when he says that “purifies” or “cleanses” us from all we have done wrong. He wipes the slate clean. He wants us to be able to start all over.

Dear friends, that’s good news. What a marvelous blessing to be able to know that we have been forgiven. Does that describe you today? Or, are there things in your life that you just haven’t wanted or had the courage to bring before the God who already knows you and your actions.

Possibly you have confessed some sin or sins, experienced the blessing of forgiveness and then after a while doubted what took place. You’ve gone back and picked up what God wanted to leave behind and abandon.

If any of this describes you, these next minutes can be very important for you. In the stillness of these moments you can experience the blessing of forgiveness.

It is a marvelous blessing to forgive others just as we have been forgiven.

In Colossians 3:13, Paul writes, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

The idea here is simple yet often difficult. As God has forgiven us for our wrong doing, so are we to forgive the wrong doing of others. We receive blessing when we leave behind or abandon what someone else has done to wrong us. We are called to treat others with the same grace that has been extended to us.

The problem, of course, is that we are not “faithful and just” like God is. All too human, we hold grudges and foster thoughts of revenge. We want to hurt those who have hurt us.

Forgiving others can be very difficult. William S. Stoddard puts it in the proper perspective when he writes, “Forgiving the unforgivable is hard. So was the cross: hard work; hard wood; hard nails.”

I like what Alexander DeJong writes about forgiving others:
“To forgive someone involves three things. First, it means to forgo the right of striking back. One rejects the urge to repay gossip with gossip and a bad turn with a worse turn. Second, it

means replacing the feeling of resentment and anger with good will, a love which seeks the other's welfare, not harm. Third, it means the forgiving person takes concrete steps to restore good relations."

If I gave you a bag of a half dozen chocolate chip cookies and said go give these to the person you need most to forgive, to whom would you take them?

At this point, I want to introduce Scott Brooks, a member of SPC who is going to share with us the blessing he has received in coming to the point of forgiving another person.

Scott's story of forgiveness.

Application

The table we are about to gather around in the sacrament of Holy Communion is a Table of Forgiveness. As we celebrate around it, we are reminded of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who made forgiveness possible. Through Him not only are we forgiven, but we are called to forgive others.

Tony Campolo, gifted speaker and writer shares this story of his childhood that speaks so well to this being a Table of Forgiveness:

"Sitting with my parents at a Communion service when I was young, perhaps six or seven years old, I became aware of a young woman in the pew in front of us who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading the passage of Scripture written by Paul that says, "Whoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (I Corinthians 11:27). As the Communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman before me, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that my Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and, in his broken English, said sternly, "Take it girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?"

She raised her head and nodded—and then took the bread and ate it. I knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden lifted from her heart and mind. Since then, I have always known that a church that could offer Communion to hurting people was a special gift from God."

Dear friends, that's exactly what we are doing here today. If you are hurting today, maybe needing the blessing of being forgiven or forgiving someone else, "Take the bread and take the juice. It was meant for you.

When we look at Communion as a Table of Forgiveness we begin to capture the idea that Lee Eclov captures in these words from a sermon entitled, "The sinner's Feast."

"This table is different. This table of the Lord isn't where sinners find Christ but where sinners celebrate being found...

Maybe some morning, instead of solemnly passing these trays, we should dance for joy. Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should tell our 'homecoming' stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death. Maybe we should ask if anyone wants seconds and hold our little cups high to toast lost sisters found and dead brothers alive."

Let us celebrate the blessing of forgiveness!