

“The Importance Of Forgiveness.”

Matthew 18 : 21-35

I want to ask you a very important and penetrating question this evening to set the stage for our sermon. Please answer it in the quietness of your own heart but with utter honesty. Do you have a forgiving spirit? Do you have a forgiving spirit?

You could probably answer this question with both a yes and no. When it comes to the difficult subject of forgiveness, there are always limitations, conditions, circumstances, and varying qualifications to the answer we give. However, as we gather this evening, we know that forgiveness is central to the living out of the Christian faith. We pray every week in our Lord's Prayer the following petition: "Forgive us our wrongs, as we forgive those who wrong us." We further say these words in our UCC Statement of Faith as we address them to God: *“You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.”*

Yes, forgiveness is something so powerful that it can frustrate us, frighten us, and freeze us into an assortment of human behaviors that can paralyze us in many detrimental ways. It can also "free" us to love more deeply. From our Gospel text this evening found in St. Matthew 18:21-35 it so frustrates Peter that he asks our Lord Jesus Christ, how many times shall I forgive my brother? It was as though Peter was saying, "Just give me the bottom line, so I can understand." Peter knew that forgiveness was both difficult and demanding to the human spirit. He wanted to know just what he was getting himself in for. Peter, never being bashful to open his mouth, asked straightforwardly, "How many times should I forgive someone?"

I believe here in this text we see Peter asking for help about the subject called forgiveness. I'm glad, aren't you, that Peter asked for help, because I also need help with this thing called forgiveness. May I ask again, do you have a forgiving spirit?

Forgiveness is never easy, but it is the will of God. Forgiveness is not something based on popularity as determined by the most recent Gallop Polls but is a biblical mandate that is reflected in God's salvation act at Calvary.

I'll never forget watching the 2003 National League Championship Series between the Chicago Cubs and the Florida Marlins. The Cubs had the Marlins with their backs to the wall...they were up on the Marlins three games to one.

By all accounts it seemed that the Chicago Cubs were about to make their first World Series appearance since the extinction of the dinosaurs.

But, running true to form, the Cubs figured out a way to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and break the hearts of their loyal fans! When they had a chance to put away the Marlins and take the series, they choked. They started losing.

The National League Championship Series stretched out to Game 6. But...then things started looking up again. It was the eighth inning and Cubs pitcher Mark Prior had been pitching a shutout that had the Cubs leading 3-0. All they had to do was win that game and they were off to the 2003 World Series! They were just five outs away!

Now enter a fan in seated in aisle 4, row 8, seat 113. His name: Steve Bartman. When the Marlins were at bat in the top of the eighth inning, a pop foul was hit over in the direction of the section where Steve Bartman was sitting. And, just like any fan would want to do, Bartman was lucky enough to reach out and catch it.

The only trouble with this is that it was a catch-able ball being pursued by a Cubs player named Moises Alou, who, ran over to the fence to catch it and make an out. Unfortunately, Cubs fan Steve Bartman caught it instead and the Cubs were denied the out.

Everything just seemed to come unraveled after that, with the Cubs not only choking and losing that game, but also losing Game 7 and the series.

Lots of Cubs fans believe that the Cubs lost that game and the series, all because of Steve Bartman catching that pop foul from his seat in row 8. He had to be escorted from Wrigley Field by Event Security and Chicago Police, because there were fans in the ballpark who wanted to harm him. As a matter of fact, to this very day there are threats made against Steve Bartman's life!

How ridiculous it is...to harbor unforgiveness towards someone over a baseball game! It isn't Steve Bartman's fault that the Chicago Cubs play the way they do! He gets death threats! But, an unforgiving spirit will cause people to do extraordinarily evil things.

Many years ago there was a movie titled, "Stars in My Crown." It told of an elderly black man who owned a little farm outside a southern town. Some very precious metal was discovered in that area, and suddenly there was pressure on him from many people to sell his land. But he would not sell. He wanted to stay exactly where he was. However, the people in the area would not take "no" for an answer. They did everything they could to make him move. They burned down his barn, shot through his house one night, and eventually threatened to hang him by sundown the next day if he did not agree to sell.

The local Methodist minister heard about the trouble and went to visit the old man. At sundown of the next day, all the leading citizens of the community came to the farm dressed in their white hoods. They were ready to hang the black gentleman if he refused to sell. The farmer came out on the porch to meet them wearing his best clothes. He said that he was ready to die and that he had asked the minister to draw up for him his Last Will and Testament, which he wanted to have read at that time.

The minister read the will, and those present realized quickly the old man was giving everything to them. He willed the farm to the banker who seemed so hellbent on having it. He gave his rifle to another of the men there who had first learned to hunt with it. He gave his fishing pole to another. In fact, that old man gave everything he had to the people who were prepared to kill him. He killed them first with love and affection.

The impact was incredible. Seeing goodness given in the face of such animosity was more than any of them could tolerate. One by one, in shame, they turned away, and the entire lynching mob disappeared. The minister's grandson had watched everything from a distance, and as everyone departed, he ran up to his grandfather and asked, "What kind of will was that, Granddaddy? The old minister answered, "That, my son, was the will of God."

Doesn't that make you think about the cross? And thinking about the cross makes us think about God and God's forgiving, self-giving love. This is the way we sing about it:

And when I think that God his Son not sparing Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,

That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing

He bled and died, to take away my sin.

This man was able to forgive because he had been forgiven by his Father in Heaven and he in turn could then pass on and share the gift of forgiveness in any circumstance of life. This man was able to forgive because he was

close to the heart and mind of God.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF US IS CONTINGENT ON OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS. YES -- IT'S *THAT* SERIOUS!

The Bible is very clear here. If we do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will our Heavenly Father forgive us. We must forgive in order to be forgiven. There is a good reason for this. The love of God cannot enter an unforgiving heart, and if we don't allow God's forgiveness to first enter us, we can't pass on what we haven't yet received. However, once we genuinely experience it, we can do nothing else but forgive. Being unforgiving has the effect of locking the door of the heart from the inside; since our God never forces His way in or kicks down the door, we must first open it from the inside.

A captive was once brought before King James II of England. The King chided the prisoner: "You know that it is in my power to pardon you?" The scared, shaking prisoner replied, "Yes, I know it is in your power to pardon me, but it is not in your nature." The prisoner had keen insight to know that unless a person had a spiritual rebirth that we have no nature to forgive.

The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is that it is both in the power and the nature of Jesus to forgive and to pardon. Yes, Jesus doesn't forgive the sin as much as he forgives us.

I close with the story told about a woman who heard the imminent return of Christ was a hand, and he was going to knock on her door at 3:00 p.m. that day for a short visit. She prepared herself and her house for such a royal visit. At 3:00 p.m. the bell rang. She ran enthusiastically to the door, and she was disappointed because there stood an angry bitter, cold, frowning, grotesque looking person. She shouted out, "Who are you?" and Jesus said, "Didn't you expect me to be here?" She shouted out, "You are not the real Christ." He said, "You are absolutely right, I am not. I'm the Christ everyone sees in you."

I hope and pray that we can all stand at the foot of the cross. Each time we stand at the foot of the cross two truths emerge for us:

At the Cross we are reminded of our need of forgiveness.

At the Cross we are reminded we are already forgiven.

Do you have a forgiving spirit? Amen.