

Several months ago, the Adult Christian Education committee chose the theme of “Relationships” as the foundation for our Adult curriculum for the 2020-2021 school year. As usual, their wisdom, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit has brought us the most appropriate topic for one of the most difficult years in our nation’s history. This year, we will explore, both in Sunday School and in our Sunday worship, what it means to relate to God, each other, and ourselves. As Christians, we are called to relate to each other and with the world in ways that defy social norms. Our social and economic system sharply divides us between rich and poor; blue collar and white collar; east side and west side; Republican and Democrat. While these differences do not disappear in the sanctuary, Christians are called to live in a way that differences are no longer a barrier to love, inclusion, and grace. Forgiveness is the foundation for all communities of faith.

Forgiveness is also the foundation for all Christian relationships, both in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. Because, as much as we like to pretend that church is a Christian utopia, it is filled with people. Even people who are generally good intentioned sin against each other. Sometimes you are the person who needs forgiveness, sometimes you are the one who should offer it.

Forgiveness, despite its connections with grace, is not always an easy or joyful emotion. I myself have had a lifelong complicated relationship with forgiveness. For one, I don’t like admitting I’m wrong. I also do not like to believe that I am capable of harming or hurting another person. I remember the first real fight my husband and I had as newlyweds. We were on our own in Louisville, KY, thousands of miles from people who knew us or loved us. We were down to our last hundred dollars or so. I don’t remember the cause of the fight, just that words were said, doors were slammed shut. I desperately wanted to leave, but, as we

only had one car and were in a new city, I didn't know where to go. I remember opening the doors, sitting on the floor (we had no furniture yet), and saying mutual "I'm sorrys." But even then, rising on the hot afternoon air, that feeling of shame lingered. The afternoon drifted to evening in semi-silence, until, deciding it was time to eat, we walked over, hand in hand, to the pub down the street.

Forgiveness, and its close relative, Reconciliation, is a *process*, not a *product*. We want to shake hands and move on when conflict has been resolved, but the forgiveness and reconciliation process can often take years. It is uncomfortable to ask for forgiveness. It takes humility, to start, to admit that wrongdoing. This Summer has been a time of civic and cultural unrest as Black Americans continue to die at the hands of law enforcement in disproportionate numbers. There have been protests across the nation such that we have not seen the height of the civil rights movement. I know that not all of us agree on solutions or approaches to complicated social issues. I do wonder, though, how the church could lead, right now, in asking forgiveness for the ways we have contributed to segregation and the disenfranchisement of people of color? What would it look like if leaders of predominantly white churches and denominations modeled having uncomfortable and humbling conversations surrounding race and privilege?

If forgiveness is the foundation for relationships, then the Spirit calls us to lay down the first stone.

In the parable, the servant of the king owes 10,00 talents which would be about 60 million denarii. No one could hope to repay such a sum. Jesus employs some hyperbole here (how could a servant rack up that much debt? Student loans?) to illustrate the absurdity of the loan, and the extravagance of the king's forgiveness. The debt ought to be a life sentence and yet, the servant is granted freedom. If you have ever paid off a car, or a home, or other debt, there is a feeling of deep relief when the debt is paid in full. Jesus has paid the debt of our sins, and what he asks of us is to use that gift of freedom and reconciliation to

forgive the debts of others. In last week's sermon, I mentioned that people often refuse to go to church because it's full of hypocrites. We act like hypocrites when we pray our prayer of confession, rejoice in God's forgiveness, then refuse to seek or offer forgiveness from our siblings in Christ.

Some of you may recall the name, Botham Jean, the Dallas man who was shot in his own apartment by Amber Guyger, an off-duty police officer. She had entered Botham's apartment by mistake, thinking it was hers, mistook him for an intruder, and shot him in the chest.

At her trial a year later, Botham's heartbroken younger brother Brandt took the stand and told Amber that he forgave her, that he wanted only the best for her, and that he wanted her to give her life to Christ, something that he said Botham would have wanted as well.

And then, after asking permission from the judge and to the astonishment of all present, Brandt walked across the courtroom and embraced the woman who killed his brother. She clung to him, sobbing. It was an incredibly moving and courageous example of forgiveness.

Now, there are some important caveats to make. First, forgiveness is not license for continued injustice, abuse, or oppression. An unrepentant sinner (or an unjust system) cannot be allowed to continue to harm others. There is need for repentance and reform in many societal systems and in our own lives.

Also, forgiveness does not erase consequences. Forgiveness may heal a relationship, but it does not erase all the consequences of sin.¹

Relationships are the core of who and what we are. Communities that regularly practice forgiveness reflect the Kingdom of God.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5454>