

Calvary United Methodist Church
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FORGIVENESS, A KEY TO LIFE
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Children's Message:

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I want to chat a little bit today about the word "forgiveness" because it's really new life. If you really want to shout out to God and the things that get us excited, it's when you know that you have peace in your life.

There was a time when Jesus was having a chat with a man named Peter and they were talking about forgiving one another. Have you ever made mistakes? Have you ever made your parents mad? Have your parents ever made you mad? Ahhh. Well, sometimes that happens in life and sometimes, I want to believe most of the time, we don't hurt each other on purpose but we think, I think about me sometimes more than others and then I do something and somebody gets hurt.

And so this man, Peter, asks the Lord: "How often should I forgive someone who sins against me or hurts me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven."

That's a big rule to follow. In other words, quit counting. Don't keep track. Who could keep track of seven times seventy? That's a big number, right?

How many of you play soccer? Most of you have at least seen a soccer game, right? When I was little, that game really didn't exist much. I was getting pretty old when they started playing soccer in this country, or at least in my little town. But like all sports, there's some rules and when we play the game, do you have any reasons why there are rules in the games that we play? (Child speaks.) One of them is so nobody gets hurt and that's one I want to focus on today. That was exactly right.

We don't like to hurt each other, do we? And if we didn't have rules and you were able to hit and strike and poke people, people could get hurt pretty badly and we see that from time to time when people do things they shouldn't do. For those who play this game, there is a yellow card. Do you know what the yellow card means? (Child speaks.) When you do something wrong, it's a warning card. When you get that yellow card, it means you did something that you shouldn't have done. For instance, the ball is coming and I kick your face. That would hurt, right? We're not allowed to kick people in the face. And I'm not allowed to trip them because people can break bones and get hurt really bad and hurt their neck and hurt their back. There are rules to protect us all the time.

And then there is this card. You see what it is? What does that mean? You are out of the game and I was told in the first group there was a young child here this morning who had been playing soccer camp all week, not only are you out of the rest of this game, but you miss the next game. That's pretty severe. It's saying what you did can really hurt someone.

So, when God says to us that we need to forgive, He says: I'm making a different rule. You are not out. I want you to think what you have done, I want you not to hurt people. We don't bully people, we don't push, we don't shove, physical, but sometimes the things we do with our mouth, young and adult, we say things that we can't take back. Things like "I hate you." We should never say things like that. We all get mad; everybody in this room gets mad and we get hurt and people say things that hurt us and we need to think before we say something mean because there is a tendency to want to say something back and that gets us into trouble, right? So God is telling us through this whole practice that we need to forgive people and God gives different roles.

Some of you have played baseball, softball, little leagues and stuff, right? (I watch baseball games.) You watch the games? In baseball, there are a lot of rules too. What does this mean? It's another out. When I was young we used to sing a song and it basically said in baseball you get 1, 2, (3 strikes you're out.) Three strikes. They give you three chances, not the red card right away, right?

And so it is with most of life, but in our life, God says: when things happen, instead of pushing us out of life, I want you to think a little bite. Before I say to my brother, my sister, my parents, my friend, my teacher, someone, before I say something mean or nasty or hurtful, I think: should I really say this? Probably not. We try to be loving. God wants us to love and forgive and offer other people a chance to say they are sorry from time to time. It's a good things.

When Jesus had that talk with Peter, he was trying to tell him: Look, people make mistakes. We can't give up on each other.

Now, if someone is hurting you all the time, God doesn't want us to keep coming back and getting hurt; not adults. There comes a time when we need to be apart from people who create problems. But that doesn't mean we have to hate or we have to be mean or we have to be nasty. We just protect ourselves emotionally, spiritually, physically, by being away from people who aren't really nice. He says we must forgive seventy times seven, or in other words, don't bother counting. Because we all make mistakes, right?

So, when we make a mistake, some of the biggest words that we can learn are not just "oops" but is saying, "Sorry." Sometimes those are hard words to say, but the help bring healing because when I say to someone, "I'm sorry," it makes things a lot better.

Sometimes we even see adults who don't talk to each other, but what we do is we pray to

God: God, help me be a better person. I pray this every day. If I can't sleep at night, I say: God, please help me. God wants us to talk to Him all the time. He can be our friend, that we might have peace, that we might make peace and that we might learn to forgive one another because when someone is sad, I don't know about you, but I have two older sisters and when I used to not get along with them, how about do boys fight sometimes with sisters? You know what it is all about don't you? You have a couple of them. And I did that too. And you know what? I had to say, "I'm sorry," sometimes. And doesn't it feel better when we are talking to each other and we're loving each other and caring for each other.

The word "Sorry" helps us to do a lot of things because forgiveness brings smiles back to our faces. I don't know about you, but when I have had a fight with someone that I love, I don't sleep well, but when I say, "I'm sorry, please forgive me," they say, "Okay." Then here's how I sleep. Ahhh... It is just a good thing to put your head on the pillow at night and know that you are right with God, right with the people that love you.

So, I hope throughout this summer and the rest of your life we always strive to do the right thing, to make apologies, to correct our mistakes, to say we are sorry and to forgive other people who have hurt us.

Thank you for coming. Thank you for being in VBS. Thank you for being a light of Jesus Christ. Have a wonderful week. Thanks again.

Message:

Forgiveness is a key to new life. It's a key to sleeping better. It is a key to less back pain. It is a key to less stomach ache. It's a key to a lot, because when we have evil and vengeful and anger going on in us, we can't have any peace at all.

The world in which we live, at least in my many years, is about as tormented and about as mean and nasty as I have ever seen, from the top down. Our culture is mean, we put mean things on Facebook. We say mean things to our family, to our friends, to our neighbors, to our co-workers and to all of this Jesus Christ says: We need to clean up our act. We need to love one another. We need to be filled with grace. We need to know that we have made mistakes and people have given us a second chance and we need to give people how many? Seventy times seven.

Now, certainly, if someone is bring bullying and mean and nasty to you, there are those situations where we have to separate us, but we don't have to put others down even in that case. We don't have to be demeaning and ugly and mean.

Forgiveness is a grace that allows us to live with peace, to know that if I am living in the righteousness of God that I am doing the right thing. I am not lifting myself up, but I am certainly not putting other people down. It won't take us anywhere to be mean and nasty peo-

ple.

A part of this lesson today is trying to understand that we are the light of Jesus Christ. We are the witness of God. Other people are looking to us and if the church can't look different than the world, how will the world ever turn to God? We, if we are sitting in here, have identified as a part of the family of God.

I'm not sure what images you have grown up with of God. Some Heavenly Father that is way apart from us is this Creator God, this Judging God. I've heard all of that, that's much of what we remember from the Old Testament. It is that God who somehow is out there somewhere creating this new universe, placing a man and a woman in a garden and having all these rules.

I choose to rather believe in my own mind that God who has the whole world in his hands; our God who loves no matter what. We live in a society and in a church sometimes where people say you are in or you are out. We have all these rules for living and why God does not like everything we do, the rules that came through Jesus Christ is: Love God with your heart and your soul and your mind and love your neighbor as yourself. It doesn't get much easier. It is focused around one word: Love.

I don't have to worry about someone gender or neutrality or race or their sexuality. I don't need to worry about anything. God says, "Just love." I don't need to judge, I don't need to condemn, I don't need to put down, because God showed us what God is really like when we celebrate Christmas, when He gave us this little boy who came into the world and He said, "My Son will teach you who to love."

There is not one place in the New Testament that you will find God telling anyone else or Jesus saying to someone: get away from me, I don't like you. There is no place in the Word of God that God will do that. Jesus was welcoming. It didn't matter who they were, where they were, even when the disciples wanted to cast people off and we know in those days especially children and especially women, "They can't be with you, Lord." He said what? "Bring the children unto me. Do not hinder them, for such belongs the family of God."

As Jesus grew in years, he came to the point of his ministry where he tried to take disciples who were formed by that old legalism and that old judge mentalism saying that one group is better than another. Folks, I don't know who you think you are better than. I know a long time from my mother and father they've taught me many times: don't think you are ever better than anyone else.

I came home from a mission one time, I was about 14, and I made fun of someone. My father told me to leave the table and don't come back. He wanted to imprint on me at that time that: don't you ever make fun and think that you are better than someone else.

We are on a journey. We are the family of God. When I went through that flood of Agnes in 72, what I learned: people in my town that didn't talk to one another, their houses were filling up with water, basement and first floors and some second floors. When you need each other, you stop name calling.

Folks, we need each other. We need each other to bring the Kingdom of God. I'm tired of this culture we are living in. I'm tired of hatred and meanness and ugliness. Jesus spent his time with these men and with the others, with the outcasts. The disciples didn't want him to meet with children, they didn't want him to be with women, they didn't want him to be with people who they thought were out of God's Kingdom, and Jesus said: I won't have it. I am trying to teach you that I am about love. I'm about anything but judgement. I am about people changing. If you live right, you don't have to judge. People will see the right way to live and they will come back to me. He washed the feet of those who never thought about being a servant to somebody else to teach us that you and I need to be servants to all the people.

He set before them a vision to transform the world. When I was called into the ministry, all that I wanted to do was to share God's Word. I want us to be life-changers. I want everyone who wears that label of Christian to say: I'm changing the world even if the world is just around my family, my friends, my co-workers, I'm a part of bringing the Kingdom of God into its fullness, and when they do that, we see the nature of God.

This story that I shared today was a part of three stories: there was a lost sheep, there was a lost coin and there was this lost young man. I can't look at that photo that my heart doesn't cry inside. I've seen brokenness. In my last few years, I've seen it all my life, but in my last few years, I don't know how many funerals I've done when some children don't come to their own mother or father's funeral. Some parent doesn't come to their child's. It's just brokenness, because someone's, we use the word "POed," right? It's somebody else. May God forgive us for not making peace with the people in our life.

You see, we need to believe in God, that if we believe and God doesn't change our hearts the belief isn't doing much. We need to be people who are transformed. In spite of what people do to us, we need to be bigger. In the name of Jesus Christ, we hung them on a cross. Yes, our sins. And yet he said what? "I forgive you." It's pretty big. That's a big man who will die for you and for me.

Coming to understand God is understanding a lot of things but there are three things I want you to walk away with. The first one is: Our God regrets our rebellion. All of us have had those times. Any of you who were a teenager once know what you were like, right? I can only imagine; I've met some of you in adulthood. Come on, laugh a little. And some of you have raised teens. I don't know that I was the worst child in the world, but I knew when you get to the teens you always know more than mom and dad, you know that, right? And that puts a wall up.

Our God says this to us: I don't want brokenness. This young man walked up to his father and according to the Jewish law, the older son would get two-thirds of the estate, the younger a third. He said: Dad, I know you are not dead yet, because that's what he is saying. I want my third right now. Wow! Wow! Can you imagine saying to your parent: give it to me now, I'm not going to wait until you die. His father gave it to him. He gave it to him and the boy walked out. Can you imagine the heartache of that father?

I don't know about you, but there are a lot of warning signals in life and most of us know when you are about to make bad decisions. As a teenager you often hear this: Oh, come on. Either everyone does it or your parents won't find out. Anyone live that lie? Guess what? Parents must have some sort of a communication thing; they find out.

What happens when you make decisions? I've seen it; I've lived it and I've heard it a lot in my office through the years. Someone says: let's have a party and you drink and the police come. The police come and you start running away, ok? And then you run away and you might get in a car and you drive and you have an accident and after the accident you run from the accident and then you get caught later because they are always going to find you. And then you lose your license and you want a job and you can't get a job because no one will... you see what I'm saying here?

Sin is catchy and it rapidly goes down the tube because all of a sudden it's not one set, it's a chain of fifteen sins and my life is being ruined and we're blaming all those other people. It's their fault, because we choose not to understand that sin enslaves us. If we want forgiveness and we want grace and we want mercy, we need to think straight.

The scriptures are pretty clear about sins. The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them. The cords of their sins hold them fast. When you start down that, whether it's alcohol, whether it is drug, whether it is sexual immorality, whatever it is, fighting with people, it just gets worse and you can blame all the other people you want. If you don't get a grip on your own life, it's going to be a mess.

God invites us to seek reconciliation, to seek peace, to do what is right to get our lives together. The father that had his son tell him that must have truly thought: Oh, my gosh. I love my son, but I'm not going to demand, I'm not going to force his love.

Did you ever think you wanted someone to stay in a relationship with you if they don't really love you? Some of you have dated. Some of you have been in a relationship. Some of them are broken. I've been there. Do you really want to be with someone who doesn't want you? The father basically said to him: you can go.

We have three key players here: the father, the older son and the younger son and I am going to speak just today about the father and the younger son because the younger son of this is you and me. And the father our Heavenly Father. The parable is really a story about that,

how we want to run, how we want to do our own thing and how we want to stray from God and our Heavenly Father, instead of the prodigal son, let's talk about a loving father.

There are a lot of times relationships are broken and this son broke his relationship with his father, but he didn't sever it. There is a difference. When we cut off from our parents, wherever we go we are still their children. And most parents, thanks be to God, are ready to welcome you home. Our Heavenly Father's heart is broken when we walk away. From the moment we say: Lord, I want to be your child, I want to follow you, I've been baptized in you, I dedicated my life to you, I was perhaps confirmed in faith to you, I chose to live for you and now I'm going to go and do my own thing. It breaks God's heart, but God is never going to demand that we stay we don't want to be. God will let us journey and yet in the midst of that, God's all signs say: I wish you would choose Christ and choose life because when we go away from God we often get down a path that's not one bad decision or two or three, 15 bad decisions down the road and we're still going.

Most of us have seen those relationships, some of them are very unhealthy, and we need to be able to do the right thing. Some people say: well, you are free to go and in the midst of all this brokenness, God says: I do not want brokenness. I want healing. I want us to come. And some people say: Why didn't God help me in the brokenness of my marriage or with my alcohol or with my drugs or my sexual addictions or whatever those problems are in life. God gave us freedom. You don't want your parent telling you how to live, right?

We always say things: I'm an adult now. Oh, so now I can make bad decisions even better. Adult doesn't mean we have all the freedoms. God says: I'll give you the freedom you want. He didn't stop Adam and Eve. He didn't stop a lot of those people in; the Bible who did a lot of bad things. But he also doesn't keep us from all the consequences of our bad decisions. Why doesn't God help? Because God wants you to have a life. He tells us all the time of the warning signs of sin and you can see it. As soon as you do something you know in your heart and mind already it's wrong.

I didn't need someone else telling me when I was wrong most of the time. At home I'd feel guilty. Guilt is a good sign that there probably is some sin in there somewhere. It's a reminder that something needs to be made right. If we are not sure of the nature of God, I want you to know this: we are prodigals and God's always saying: come home. Here's God: Come. Come on home. I love you no matter where you have been, no matter what you have done. Come on home, I've got something better.

We worship our God who does regret our rebellion, but here is our God. God is the God who runs to us when we return.

Here was this young man telling his father: give me my money and I'm going to run off and he gets into trouble and the big six words he said: He squandered his wealth in wild living.

Can you imagine, you are living in some sort of a castle, though I doubt his looked like this. You had all the food, you had servants, you had everything you needed, clothing, shelter, food, but I'm going to go party for a while, God. And God says, that's okay, you go away if you want. He was sitting down eating with the pigs. My pap was a pig farmer. We had dairy, we had pigs, we had chickens. I want to tell you this: I've helped drag a lot of pigs out of pigpens. Two days later you smell your hands. I don't care if you use Ivory, I don't care if you use Dawn, I don't care what you use, you still smell pig. The food the pig was eating was looking good to him: the corn cobs and the peapods and you know what he had to swallow worse than that? Pride.

You know why there is a lot of friction in our world and why brothers and sisters and parents and children and friends don't get talk? Pride. We refuse to forgive one another until, I loved this word: Jeff came to his senses. Yeah, I've done that a couple of times and I think you probably have too. When we come to our senses, we do something called repent: Dad, Mom, I'm sorry. And I go home.

When we repent, God is out there welcoming us home. Thank God, our Heavenly Father is not like a lot of earthly fathers. Did you ever hear these lines? Forget it! 1, 2, 3, strikes you are out! You had your chance. You have made your bed. You are getting what you deserve. Those are not really helpful things, are they? It is much better to say, a mother and father says: you really hurt me. It hurts bad, but I love you more. Amen. You hurt me bad, you can be honest. God can be honest, but I love you more. By seeing him in that lane, he loved him all the more.

Hear this: while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, was filled with compassion and ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. I love the story. In Greek it says he just didn't kiss him. Did you ever have a baby and you go...it says he lavished kisses on his son. Man, my son has been away. He was dead and he is alive. He lavished love on his son, just as he was. His son probably stunk pretty bad. His son was probably hungry. He didn't cast anything to him.

Our God isn't the one who is going to cast our sin before us because you and I know our sin. There is a song we sing: Just as I am, without one plea. He ran to him and our God is coming to you, He is coming to me all the time saying: Please come home. Please make peace. Please live the way we ought to live. Our God does what? He restores us. Oh, my gosh! When I see the photos of men coming home and women coming home from war, what happens to you when you see them meeting their loved ones? Tears of joy, peace: you are safe. You are home. I've missed you. Let's celebrate. That's our God. Could we be those people? Can we be those people who, no matter what has happened, when we say: I've sinned against you and heaven, do we say: Of course, of course I forgive you.

Earnest Hemmingway wrote a good called Capital of the World and it takes place in Spain. And there was a man there who had a son. His name was Pico. Pico was a very common

name in that culture. His son had made him mad and for years they didn't speak and it stirred the father's every night. I've had those problems where you don't sleep for days or weeks or months and yes, some will bug you for years when you can't, you don't know what to do to make it right. Finally the father could take it no longer. He paid thousands of dollars on the very front of the paper in Spain in Madrid. And he said: Pico, I forgive you, I love you. Please meet me tomorrow morning in front of the Post Office. He went the next morning and this chokes me up even more, the common name...in his book over 600 men were waiting to find their father. Imagine that. 600 men were hoping their father would forgive them, would love them, would accept them, would receive them. And you know what? Today Jesus would take out the biggest article in the world to say: Come home; you are forgiven. Come home, you are forgiven.

The only way for us to heal this weary land of America, this global community filled with war and fighting and rumors of war is to find forgiveness. There is a song I love taken basically from the story of David after he had sinned: Search me, O God, and know my heart. See if there is an offensive way in me and lead me in the way to everlasting life. I don't know about you; I need it every day. I say, I do, I think things that are not right. And God says: Jeff, clean yourself up today. Let's start anew.

We worship a God who regrets our rebellions; our God runs to us; our God restores us. This prodigal son reminds us we don't need to stay in the pigpen. No matter what other people do, God wants to give us the key to new life and it is found in grace through forgiveness. He wants us to be washed up and cleaned up.

I pray today will be a day of new beginnings for all of us and that we will find the grace to forgive those who have offended us that we might live in His peace. Amen.