

“Forgive from Your Heart”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 18: 21-35

In the heat of the moment, the wrong thing was said. You had tried to hold back, to be patient, to not let the emotion take control of your tongue. But it was too late – the hurtful, painful words of anger came out of your mouth like a dart aimed directly at your friend. It has been several days since the confrontation, and you regret deeply what you said. You know you don’t deserve a second-chance, and you wish you could turn back time. And then, there’s a knock at your door. Your friend is standing there, saying, “I forgive you,” and you are speechless. It was nothing you deserved; it was the opposite of what you expected; it brought you back to wholeness.

You get to class and have a funny feeling in your gut. You’re not sure why, but something just doesn’t feel right. And then, the teacher says, “Please pass your research papers to the front.” In your mind, you think, “She didn’t just say that, right?” But then you realize your blunder: you wrote the deadline for the project on your calendar a week later than today, and you are nowhere near ready to turn it in. As your classmates pass their papers to the front, you sheepishly walk to the teacher’s desk. Her reputation precedes her: no excuses, no exceptions, no mercy! But as you explain the circumstances, you notice something in her eyes which catches you off-guard. Instead of indifference, you are met with kindness: “Bring it to me by the end of the week, and there won’t be a penalty.” It was nothing you deserved; it was the opposite of what you expected; it brought you back to wholeness.

To be forgiven is a remarkable thing. It catches us off-guard, and turns us in a new direction. It restores stability where there had been insecurity. Hope replaces despair. A favor is granted which is beyond measure. To be forgiven is a remarkable, transformative thing.

Jesus uses a parable to help us understand the depth of forgiveness that God grants to us. A slave owed his king ten thousand talents. That is the equivalent of 150,000 years’ wages of one laborer (18:24). In other words, it was an amount that could never be repaid – certainly not in an individual’s lifetime. The king’s first reaction is to have the slave sold, along with his family and his possessions, so that the debt might be settled. But it is the slave’s pleading which changes the king’s mind: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything” (18:26). And with that, forgiveness is granted; the debt is forgotten; the slave’s life is spared.

It would be great if that was the end of the story. Then we wouldn’t have to think about how we will respond to a friend who wrongs us. Then we wouldn’t have to worry about how “being forgiven” changes our relationships with our fellow brother and sister.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. The forgiven slave, even before he has left the king's courtyard, finds a man who owes him the equivalent of a hundred days' wages. That man pleads in the same manner as the forgiven slave had: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But there is no mercy; there is no patience; there is no transformation on the forgiven slave's part. There is only a selfish, limited view of the world, and judgment is substituted for grace.

This is not acceptable behavior for the king, and it is not acceptable behavior for our God. The end to this story is brutal – in its honesty and in its violence. The king will not stand for someone to refuse to give mercy to another when that one has been forgiven himself. And the lesson is brutal: God will not stand for us to live by one set of rules for our neighbor, and another – more gracious – set of rules for our God. There is only one set of rules that apply: forgive one another, as you have been forgiven. That is our call as citizens of the Kingdom, and our mission to a broken, violent, hurting world.

Forgiving from your heart means letting go of grudges that have lost their foundation over so much time. It means ending an argument with your spouse or child before it is time to go to bed, and letting love replace anger in your heart. It means realizing that it takes more energy to remain angry with someone than to let it go and move on.

Forgiving from your heart means having a long, clear memory of forgiveness offered to you. It means reflecting on those who have shown you grace, and returning thanks to God for returning you to wholeness in that way. It means changing your first instinct of, "I can't believe you did that!" to "Don't worry about it."

Living in forgiveness means looking at the world and at the church through positive, not negative, eyes. It means we don't first see the negatives of serving the church or our neighbors, such as the time involved or the anxiety of building new relationships. Instead we first look at the positive aspects of service and mission, such as reaching more and more people and fostering a place for God's Spirit to lead in new directions. It means we seek peace and companionship with those who are stereotyped as "enemy" or "traitor" simply because of their religion or ethnicity.

But that is all easier said than done. It is fine to sermonize up here on Sundays, thinking this is something that we can all do without any problem. But the truth is, when we step out of those doors, reality sets in, and we face the same, daunting challenges we faced before we came in here. How do we embody this forgiveness with which God has graced us?

A couple of weeks ago, I preached on grace and forgiveness as it's reflected in the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers. Chris Merrill mentioned to me after the service how that reminded her of Louis Zamperini and his incredible story of faith, perseverance, triumph, grace, and forgiveness. Louis Zamperini's story is told in the book "Unbroken" by Laura Hillenbrand, and it will be a major motion picture in December. I would highly

recommend the book, for it is gripping and incredible, most notably because it is a true story.

Louis was the son of Italian immigrants, who moved to California when he was a boy right before the Great Depression. He was often bullied because of his ethnicity, but in high school he found running as an escape, and went to the University of Southern California on a track scholarship. In 1936, he qualified for the Berlin Olympic Games, and at 19 years old finished eighth in the 5000 meter run.

In the Second World War, Louis was drafted into the US Army Air Forces and flew on planes throughout the Pacific. On May 27, 1943, while flying on a rescue mission, his B-24 crashed in the Pacific Ocean. He was one of only three crewmembers to survive. After more than a month in the ocean, surviving on rainwater and raw fish, he was captured by the Japanese on the Marshall Islands. The Army did not know he was alive, and listed him as Killed in Action. For the next two years, Louis was shuttled from one prisoner camp to another, suffering excruciating torture at the hands of his Japanese captors. When he was eventually liberated in 1945, Louis weighed only 75 pounds.

He got married after the war, but he struggled mightily with nightmares from his wartime trauma, and he coped with alcohol. His wife, Cynthia, invited him to attend a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles, hoping it would not only help Louis personally, but save their marriage. Through that experience, Louis became a Christian believer, and was transformed by the Gospel's message of grace and forgiveness.

Louis made the decision that since God had brought him through such adversity, and he was forgiven by such a gracious God, he was called to live by the same set of rules. He forgave his Japanese captors all the wrongs they had committed against him. And his nightmares went away.

He then spent his remaining years sharing his story of redemption and forgiveness, making numerous trips to Japan, meeting with his former guards in the prison camps, and embracing them with forgiveness and grace. Louis had every right to seek retribution for what these men had done to him and his comrades. Instead, he chose to forgive from his heart, and the effect was restoration and redemption – for all who were involved.

Louis died on July 3 of this year at the age of 97. There is no doubt that he embodied the commendation we often pronounce at the end of funerals: "Almighty God, acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

God's mercy has transformed our hearts through grace. May our hearts reflect that grace to a world desperately in need of even a few, small acts of forgiveness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.