

10-5-08 "God's answers to tough questions: how to give up a grudge?"

Ephesians 4:31-5:2

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Forgiveness. It is very important, so important to our mental health that there are several very popular books by Psychiatrists about the need to forgive. Holding a grudge or hating someone hurts us more than it hurts them. Carrying old grudges and hurts and unresolved anger causes great strain on us and our relationships moving forward. We need to free ourselves from these things. How? Forgiveness.

I want to make a couple of general statements before we get into the nitty-gritty of forgiveness.

First, forgiveness is not automatic and instantaneous. It is often hard to forgive. Sometimes the hurts we endure are deep and difficult, and we are only human. Sometimes forgiveness takes time and is a process we grow into. As I have said in earlier sermons, give yourself some grace...let yourself be human.

While God forgives us immediately, we take more time. The hurt often has to heal and we need the perspective of time and soulful reflection to really understand what happened AND what our responsibility in this really was. We are often too quick to assume blame on ourselves AND sometimes to reluctant to own our share of responsibility in conflict and failure. It takes us time to really begin to look at something and see the nuances that are there. How we might have done things

differently . This is important, for without this type of reflection we tend to do the same things over and over again...and wonder why these things keep happening to us. We need to see both sides of things...even if we determine that it was not our fault.

It always reminds me of the old joke about the man who comes to see the preacher and begins to complain bitterly about his wife. As he begins to really let into her, the preacher holds one hand over his right ear. The man goes on a for a moment or two and then stops and says, "preacher, is there something wrong with your ear?". Oh yes, the old pastor says, I'm just saving this one for the other side of the story. We have to be willing to open the other ear, and hear the other person's side of things for us to learn and grow as we forgive. Don't be in too big a hurry to forgive and forget.

So, how to forgive?

First, it begins with us. We are to forgive other just as in Christ God forgave us. We must know and experience the forgiveness of Christ before we have the capacity to forgive others. His love and forgiveness create within us a well of Grace that allows us to act with grace towards others...even those whom we might not otherwise forgive.

How does Christ forgive us?

God's forgiveness is out of his deep and abiding love for us. God does not forgive us because we repent or because we make amends or do acts of penitence. God does not withhold his forgiveness until we have met his criteria or conditions. NO. While we are still sinning God demonstrates his love for us in Jesus. God's forgiveness is done in love, not out of obligation.

If we seek to forgive others, we must begin by remembering and rejoicing in our own forgiveness in Christ. It gives us the depth, the grace, the breadth of soul to be able to forgive. Without God's forgiveness, we are continually trying to justify ourselves. We often do this by comparing ourselves to others. One of the reasons some can't truly forgive is that the grudge gives them a sense of moral superiority. They feel better than the other person, and they think it makes them a better person...or so they tell themselves. Some folks seem to only feel tall when they have cut everyone else down to size. Like a guilty child they think calling attention to other peoples short comings makes them taller. It is not so.

The truth is, the more secure you are in yourself...in your being loved and cared for, the easier it is to forgive others. A person who is terribly insecure has a hard time forgiving others. The more we know the wonderful, amazing love of God...the more we feel ourselves completely loved, forgiven and secure...the better able we are to forgive others. The more aware we are of our sins, the easier it is to overlook the sins of others. Who am I to judge, I am a sinner saved by grace...just like them. We are all human and all fall short of the glory of God.

The beginning of forgiveness is really in our being forgiven and our sense of who we are in Christ as his beloved and cared for child.

Second, Christ calls us to be the mature, responsible person. We are called to Christian maturity, and we are given the responsibility to take the initiative in matters of forgiveness. Even if the other person is the transgressor, we are still the ones God calls to begin the process of forgiveness and grace.

Jesus said that if we remember that **OUR BROTHER HAS SOMETHING AGAINST US**, we are to go to them and make peace with your brother...before you bring your offering to God.

It is important that Jesus calls the offender your brother. We are related to everyone...everyone is to be thought of as our brother or sister, a member of our family. We can not put people in boxes or categories that allow us to think less of them. We are all connected and equal, and we belong to each other.

It actually makes sense that we take the initiative. Believe it or not, the other person may not even be aware that they have harmed you in some way. They don't see things the same way as you do, and they may be completely unaware of how their words or actions affected you. When they hear it, they will often quickly seek to be forgiven and to make things right. We waste a lot of time fretting over things that could be handled very easily. And while your relationship with this person might not have been close before, it usually becomes deeper when you begin to communicate openly and bring things up that have bothered you.

You may also discover, unknown to you, that you have in some way offended the other person too. This allows you to own your own ill thought out comment or action and to build a better relationship.

We are given the responsibility of making the first move. And it must be done with humility. When you go to your brother, it is not to club them with what you think they have done wrong to you. We come seeking forgiveness, not repentance. We don't come to convince them that they were wrong, but to find a way to make things right.

Third, understand what Forgiveness is...it is letting go of the grudge. It is in love, choosing how you will remember the event or action of

another...either working to forget it, or when you remember it choosing to make that a moment to remember forgiveness rather than hate or hurt.

Know that when you forgive, you may need to negotiate a new relationship...depending on the severity of the actions involved. Forgiveness does not mean that you have to pretend that something never happened. Sometimes the trust is broken, and it will take time to build it again...if that is even possible. But we need to forgive, even if it is not possible to put things back where they were. And sometimes there are still consequences for a persons actions. We might forgive a person for what they did, but that does not mean we don't testify against them at trial! There is a big difference between punishing a person and the natural consequences for their actions.

And remember, you have the right to be safe and secure. So a wife must eventually...eventually...forgive an abusive husband, as much for herself being able to move forward as for him...but is in no way obligated to go back into an abusive situation afterward. Forgiveness does not automatically make all things just as if they had never happened.

Fourth, Take someone with you...moral support and help. Jesus said to go to them and if they don't listen, take someone with you. Not someone who will take your side, so you are ganging up on them. But someone who will be there to support you and them, and to help you both come to a resolution.

Fifth, Pray. Ask God to help you forgive. Sometimes we just can't seem to let go of something. Perhaps it has been too soon, and the wound is still fresh and hurting. Give yourself time. But sometimes it is hard, and we need God's help. We need a miracle, but the good news is that Jesus is in the miracle business. Ask God to help you forgive. If you

aren't there yet, Ask God to help you want to forgive! Help me want to forgive them...

And Pray for them. Jesus said to pray for those who persecute us and to pray for our enemies. When you pray for someone, you can be honest in your emotion. But as you pray for them, your attitude about them will change in time. Prayer changes things, but more than that...it changes us. It changes our attitude and our grudges. You can't hold grudges and really pray for someone.

Sixth...Don't give up. Be patient and persistent. Sometimes you must forgive someone without interacting with them. Circumstances prevent you from going to them. You have other choices...to write a letter or send an email may be an impersonal way to work toward forgiveness, but it does allow you to really focus on what you want to say and how...and to share the whole story without interruption. It has its advantages.

Sometimes we are unable to interact with the person at all...perhaps they are dead, or you have lost touch or whatever. If you carry a grudge, you still need to let it go. You might write a letter...sharing how hurt you were and how you now are trying to come to forgive. This helps you get things out and put them into perspective, even when you can't send the letter.

Seventh, and finally...full circle...

You are forgiven, so forgive yourself. Forgive yourself for what you have done to others, and what you haven't done you know you should. God loves us and forgives us...and we are to forgive others as Christ in God has forgiven us. As he has forgiven us. If we know we are forgiven, and we forgive ourselves, it is much, much easier to forgive others.

Here is a chance for you to begin anew in the grace and forgiveness of God. Communion is the sign of Jesus' love and forgiveness. Everyone and anyone is welcome to come...