

Becoming More Forgiving

Advent 2 Malachi 3:1-4 ; Philipians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6; Luke 1:68-79 12-10-06

At Breakfast With Santa yesterday, I was sitting with, and enjoying the company of, some of our young families from the community. Some are permanent residents, others come only on weekends. Two children were busily coloring the placemat pictures of the church that were on the table while their parents and I “talked shop.” In the midst of coloring, one of the children decided she liked the color of crayon her sister was using and simply took it from her. I think we can imagine the reaction. But this was very calm. The parents, doing a job better than I ever would have done, told the usurper of the crayon that her little sister had every right to be upset, what she had done was not right. There were a couple of little tears but there was no defiance or argument. That was that and the two went back to the task at hand. I could tell from the look on her face, that forgiveness was not the first thing on the mind of the little girl whose crayon was taken. But there also was no need in her eyes to “get” her sibling. The event was over and done with and let go of.

Every year when the Second Sunday of Advent rolls around, someone lights the Candle of Forgiveness, as did Abrah and Bev a few minutes ago. And, every year, I hear from some folks who assure me that forgiveness is one of the attributes they do not have in abundance. Some of my closest and dearest friends remind me that they struggle with granting forgiveness. They are not alone, nor are they unusual, this is a universal problem, most likely because we are human. That is why, when we witness something as stunning as the forgiveness that was extended to the murderer of those young Amish school girls, by that usually private and introspective community, we shake our heads in wonder and with an inability to fully understand. It seems that it is far easier for us to remain angry with others we believe have “done us wrong” than it is for us to let go of the pain they may have caused us and get on with life. We like to seek vengeance, forgetting that God once told those who had ears to hear, that vengeance was in our Creator’s realm not in ours.

Some people may even think it is a sign of being weak when we let go of an old injury, but Ghandi reminds us that, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” When I read this quote some time ago, I knew I needed to tuck it aside for some Second Sunday of Advent somewhere, because it has a ring of truth to it.

When we are figuratively punched in the stomach by someone we cherish and trust, we tend to remain doubled over, protecting ourselves against any further injury. Just the posture of being bent over after such an assault should speak volumes to us. We close down and curl up and cover up and try to keep from touching or being touched by any other person. We retreat from all of life. Our backs are bent under the burden of the hurt and straightening up is a task because we have to toss off the bundle of pain and anger. Can we understand, if we can see ourselves in this way, why it takes strength and courage to forgive another? It requires that we acknowledge that we have been hurt, know that the person who has hurt us is as human as we are and subject to making mistakes and that he or she is worthy of forgiveness. It takes strength for any of us to do this kind of soul searching. Along with strength, it also takes faith and an understanding of what it means to walk in the Way of Christ.

So, what if we manage to forgive but are injured a second time? We often mutter, “Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.” Does this mean we are to decide to cut someone off at the knees? Walk away and never look at or speak to that person again? Or maintain an icy edge in any encounters we may have?

Jesus tells us, that we are to forgive not just once, twice or even seven times but seventy times seven. That’s 490 times. Can we ever be made of such resilient stuff? Practice in the case of offering true forgiveness does eventually make us more perfect.

Some of the injuries dealt us are very slight, but some folks consider them deeply personal and react in a way that is stronger than is required. Who among us has not done this? We are so sensitive about ourselves at times that we forget that we are asked to do what is best for all, not just ourselves. A dear old friend of mine notes, “There are just some people who have one skin too few.” He is right. I think a second, well-waxed, waterproofed skin that allows some minor injuries to simply roll right off our backs is the kind we need to add to the one we already have. Life is so short, folks, that we simply do not have the time to indulge in little hurts and insults that effect nothing in the vast scheme of things. We need to step back from ourselves and try to observe, from a neutral stance, just how we truly are and how we react to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

We all go through difficulty in life, we all pass through refining fires, fires Malachi mentions will be ours when the one who is to be the Messiah arrives. We should be made better by these fires as they seek to burn away all that is superficial and that does not matter in life, reducing us to what is important. If we do not learn from the fires we pass through, that, indeed, is sad. Being refined helps us see ourselves objectively.

One who was able to help others see where their lives had gone amiss was John the Baptist. John, believed to be the cousin of Jesus, appeared on the scene before him, foretelling his coming. But that’s not all he did. He offered baptism, a refining or purification ritual, for the forgiveness of sins offering a new way of life after dying to the old. Repentance, is a way of saying we are sorry to God that opens us to the ability to make all things new again. This means that once we have been forgiven by God, and we have been able to forgive ourselves for our misdeeds, we should turn around and forgive others. God always moves toward us offering us forgiveness with the stipulation that we must be merciful to others and offer them this touch of grace in return. John came making ready the way for the coming of Christ, a way that was to help us all find level, common ground in our humanness.

Then Jesus came along to show us that the way of life we were to follow was the way of love and of treating one another as we would like to be treated, with acceptance, forgiveness, understanding and patience.

This season of Advent is a time set aside for us to pause and reflect on what the life of Christ has meant to us. Where would we be had Jesus never lived? Where might we be without his life and teachings? While our world seems to be pretty shaky from time to time as we fail to see and acknowledge others as the children of God, there are pockets of love, care and forgiveness, hope and joy that show us how to make things new again.

Becoming more forgiving is just one of the many ways we welcome and reveal the Christ child. Time is short for all of us, we have only the present. Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness? This is the perfect time of year time to open your heart and mind and make things right again where they have gone wrong. Amen