

Credo: I Believe in Forgiveness

February 20, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 18:21-35

Well, folks, today we are beginning to wind our way down in this sermon series that we've been exploring since the first of the year on the Apostle's Creed. We have one more week of exploration after today, and then we are going to jump into a new series for the season of Lent.

So just really quickly, let's review where we have been. The Apostle's Creed is ancient – close to 2000 years old, having been used in the early church primarily as a statement of faith in baptisms. As a way for every new Christian to basically start on the same page, with a statement of “this is what I believe.” And it has continued to be used for the last 2,000 years by churches of basically every stripe and color, as a way to continuously bring us back to the core of our beliefs.

But as we have seen, with pretty much every single little piece of the Creed, the contents of it have not been without controversy throughout the centuries. For example, we say that we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord, and the 4th Century church takes that as license to condemn heretics and burn them at the stake.

We say that we believe in the Holy Spirit, and controversy over who the Holy Spirit is prompts the first major split in the church. Never mind the fact that some of the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to bring together the body of Christ and form us over the course of a lifetime into a people of love. Nope, because we can't agree about the unifying work of the Spirit, we're going to split. Ironic, isn't it?

We say that we believe in the holy catholic church – the church universal. And yet, we live in a world of more than 45,000 different Christian denominations. We say that we believe in the communion of saints – the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us in our lives of faith and draws us together with one another. And yet, again and again and again throughout history we have prized independence over everything else and tried to go at this spiritual life alone – just “me and Jesus.” And that's never what it was intended to be.

I think it is pretty clear, as we look at the history of the church, and as we look even earlier than that – to the nature of people (especially the religious people) when Jesus was alive, and the nature of humanity all throughout the Old Testament, it's pretty clear to me that our superpower as human beings is the ability to take the amazing gifts that God has given us, and to make a royal mess of them. Over, and over, and over again. It's like living in a house with kids. I will never understand how I can spend eight hours doing

a deep clean of the house, and then within 5 minutes the kids can make it look like a tornado and a hurricane both hit at the exact same time.

But we are exactly the same way as my kids. Except in most of our cases, we're not talking about paper and toys and crayons and Legos strewn all over our floors and tabletops. But rather, a mess of clutter that settles itself deeply within our souls. Clutter that gets in the way of our ability to see and notice the movement of God within us and among us. This clutter might look like busy-ness – taking on too much and getting distracted by the “should dos” and the “must dos” and the “ought to dos” and the “I don't wanna dos.” Or, it might look like unresolved conflict with other people – where anger and frustration bubble their way down and fester in the form of resentment and hatred and rage – all of which are directly contrary to the nature of who God is. Or it might look like fear – where our souls essentially go into fight, flight, or freeze and they become effectively paralyzed due to a real or imaginary threat. Or maybe, this clutter looks like the allure of power, or wealth, or peace, or prosperity, or success – something that we chase down our entire lives before coming to the realization that the goalpost keeps moving on us, and therefore, was never really attainable in the first place.

Whatever our clutter looks like – and the clutter will be different for each one of us – we have all, without exception, become masters of making that clutter an everyday part of our lives. And then, when we as people come together, all of us dealing with our own “stuff,” it's no wonder that once in awhile my messiness will bump up against your messiness and then, kaboom. A house that looked spotless 5 minutes ago now looks like ground zero of the apocalypse. We have conflict. We have fights. We have 4th century churches burning heretics at the stake, and the 11th century church splitting over disagreements about the nature of the Holy Spirit. We have 16th century conquistadors invading new lands and converting peaceful inhabitants under the threat of death. And 21st century churches splitting and dividing over disagreements about how to best handle life in the midst of a pandemic.

We have a Russian army lining up troops on the border of Ukraine. Canadian protesters blocking major trade routes. And all of this leading to what I think is maybe the single biggest threat to us as a human race – and that is a diminished capacity for empathy. An unwillingness to try to see life through another person's eyes. A lack of recognition as to how we may be contributing to the messes around us. And an underlying belief that there is nothing for which we need to ask forgiveness.

Today, the line in the creed that we are exploring is a simple one, but also a really, really hard one – because it pushes against every single one of our defenses as people. “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

And this one is hard, because it goes two ways. It means that I am somebody who is in need of being forgiven. And that goes directly against the lies that I personally sometimes tell myself, that I am without fault. And we all know that that's not true.

And it also means that I am expected to extend forgiveness – both to other people *and* to myself, if necessary. And sometimes, hanging onto things feels a whole lot better and more satisfying in the moment, even if holding on to old grudges slowly poisons us from the inside out.

So in our scripture reading this morning, we read what is probably the biggest, classic story about forgiveness. Peter comes up to Jesus with a question. And we get the distinct feeling from Peter's question, that there is a lot more to this question that he is not sharing. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?"

First off, this question does not sound like a hypothetical. Peter phrases it as "*if* this should happen," but he wouldn't have asked the question if it had not already happened. There is something stuck in his craw and he is looking for justification. "Lord, I am frustrated. I am at the end of my rope. This person has been getting under my skin, again and again and again and again, and I have just *had it*. I've tried to make things right. I've tried to see the best in him. I've done all the right things. I've talked to him about it. I thought we were turning a corner, but then, he just came right out and did the same thing all over again, and it seems like nothing is ever going to change. So what is the point that I should just stop trying? How many times do I have to forgive him before it would be okay for me to just resolve to hate him forever? When is enough enough? Seven times? That sounds pretty generous to me. I've already forgiven him *seven* times, Jesus. Can I be done already?"

And Jesus's response is not one that Peter wants to hear. "Not seven, but seventy *times* seven."

And then Jesus goes on to tell a ridiculous-sounding parable. A story, meant to illustrate his point. There is a man who has found himself *obscenely* in debt. He owed the king ten thousand talents. And I think I have mentioned this before, but ten thousand talents in today's money would be roughly the equivalent of 164,000 *years* of wages. Or, at our current average blue collar salary, about \$8.2 *trillion* dollars.

That's more than the average GDP of most developed countries.
It would take 85 Jeff Bezoses to come up with that much money.
That's how much *debt* he was in.

It was so much debt that he and his entire family – if every one of them in every generation all worked for 50 years with no break and didn't eat and gave every penny they made to the king, this man's great great great great *great* grandchildren *might* be able to finally pay off that debt.

I think it is safe to say that this man is in deep doo doo.

So when he begs and pleads with the king to please have mercy, what does the king do? He forgives it. Every single penny.

And this would be a great story if it ended here, but it doesn't end here. And this next part is where the real, harrowing part of the story lies. This man, who has just been forgiven *everything* is on his way out of the castle when he sees a man who owes him a hundred denarii. Which is just a little less than \$14,000 in today's money. And what does he do? He beats him up, and punches him, and takes him to small claims court, and has him thrown in jail until he can pay what he owes him. And when the king gets wind of this he is furious. And has this man imprisoned until he can pay every dime of that 8.2 trillion dollars that he previously owed. Which would be, never.

"You have been forgiven *everything*," Jesus tells Peter. "The least you can do is pay that forward." And here is, I think, where context really matters. Most especially, the context of Peter's life. You see, Peter thinks that he is a pretty good guy. And he is. He's dropped everything in his life to follow Jesus. And he's not just one of the disciples. He's in the inner circle of the inner circle of the inner circle. Of all of the disciples, Peter is probably one of maybe two or three who Jesus would consider to be his very best friends. Peter is the one who Jesus calls "the rock." "Upon you, I will build my church," Jesus tells him.

Of all of the disciples, Peter is the only one brave enough to step out of the boat and walk on water when Jesus calls to him. Peter is living the high life, and he's gotten a bit of a chip on his shoulder. "I'm a good guy," he thinks. He never thinks of himself as one who would need to be forgiven.

But what Jesus knows, and what Peter does not know, is that there will come a time – sooner rather than later – when Peter will start digging *himself* into a hole out of which he will not be able to pull himself. When he will run away from Jesus in his hour of deepest need, when he will desert him, and deny ever having known him, not once, not twice, but *three times*. And then he will spiral down a hole of grief and regret and self-loathing and fear and every other kind of "soul clutter" that you can imagine, so deeply that he will no longer even consider himself as one of the disciples. He will feel so hopeless that an 8.2 trillion dollar debt would feel like pennies in comparison.

"Peter, you've *got* to forgive this man," Jesus is telling him. "Because you are not as strong as you think you are. And you have *already been forgiven* for the biggest mistake that you will ever make, and the deepest regret that you will ever carry. And it is time to give that same gift to somebody else."

Friends, forgiveness is something that is in short supply in today's world. It is way easier to cast blame; to harbor resentment; to point fingers. To forgive – to *truly* forgive means recognizing that we ourselves are forgiven. And that means acknowledging, like Peter, that we are not perfect, and that we have a deep need for forgiveness. It means acknowledging our vulnerability. That we are not as strong as we sometimes like to

think. We are not always as right as we would like to lead ourselves to believe. Sometimes, our souls look a little bit like my house; like Peter, just moments after Jesus was crucified – like a hurricane and a tornado both hit at the same time.

And sometimes, we don't like to forgive, because it is hard to admit that the person we are forgiving is, in fact, *us*. That in our act of forgiveness we see ourselves mirrored back to us. And sometimes, we don't like what we see.

But the beauty is that when we recite the words of the Apostle's Creed – "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," or when we pray the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," or, in some traditions "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," we are in fact confirming our belief in a God who is bigger than our brokenness; bigger than our debt; bigger than any sin we ever have committed or ever will commit. We have a God whose grace extends endlessly. Who forgives far more than seventy times seven times. And who also works within us so that we too might learn how to forgive; to offer empathy; to see life through one another's eyes; to mend the brokenness between us; and to begin the hard work of changing the world.