

CARING ENOUGH TO FORGIVE SERIES #5
 “FORGIVE - BY REDISCOVERING COMMUNITY”
 Genesis 50:15-21, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Matthew 18:15-20
 March 25 & 26, 2023

“In his book, *My American Journey: An Autobiography* (Random House, 1995), General Colin

Powell writes: On the speech circuit, I tell a story that goes to the heart of America's longing. ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson was interviewing a young African-American soldier in a tank platoon on the eve of the battle in Desert Storm. Donaldson asked, ‘How do you think the battle will go? Are you afraid?’

“We'll do okay. We're well trained. And I'm not afraid,’ the GI answered, gesturing toward his buddies around him. ‘I'm not afraid because I'm with my family.’

“The other soldiers shouted, ‘Tell him again. He didn't hear you.’ The soldier repeated, ‘This is my family, and we'll take care of each other.’”¹

Surely there had to have been times of disagreement and conflict that caused hurt and pain in the life of these soldiers. However they looked beyond the situations of indifference, considered the folks that they were around and through forgiveness, considered themselves a family. Men of different backgrounds, different ethnicity, different upbringings and different economic situations, all working together to become a community striving for peace and justice.

That’s exactly what we have here at Fountain Park UMC - a community of faithful people. But what do we do when someone comes here and brings disruption, disharmony, or worse? It wasn’t too long ago that this community of faith was struggling with just such a person, to the point of almost destroying this congregation. So how do we forgive such a person for what they have done? Can we love them like a member of our family and work through to forgiveness? Or do we put all the blame upon them and thrust them away from us? How does a community bring about forgiveness?

Well, to this point in our series *Caring Enough to Forgive*, we’ve been looking at how to forgive those who have hurt us or wronged us. We’ve been looking at forgiveness between two individuals and

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 296)

how that might be achieved by realizing our own wrongdoing in the situation, reaffirming love to the one who has wronged us, releasing the past wrongs since we cannot change them, and by renewing repentance so that the offender comes to grips with what they have done. Each of these is between individuals, working to restore the relationship through forgiveness. But I'll ask again, what happens when a person offends a whole community of folks? What are we to do then?

Well, each of the individual ways to forgive are important for a community, that's for sure. But when a whole community of people are wronged, there is greater work needed to be done to rediscover the community that once was and extend forgiveness to the one who brought hurt or pain.

When a community gets hurt by an individual, it is easy for that community to want to isolate and ostracize that person. It is easy for us to say "Once upon a time we were a close community, then came person 'X,' bringing distance, mistrust, and estrangement, or person 'Y' bringing fear, suspicion and silent withdrawal, or even person 'Z' causing all this anger, and resentment of each other. It's all his or her fault. If we could put it all at his doorstep, or make her suffer deeply enough to pay for it, perhaps things could be better."² Every community experiences such people causing problems.

However, this myth has been around for centuries, tried and used over and over again finding a scapegoat as an answer to whatever problem has arisen. But when we begin looking for scapegoats to blame for the problems we have, we are in danger of seeing that community broken and estranged from one another. Whenever forgiveness ends, whenever acceptance falls apart, whenever trust turns to mistrust and suspicion begins, the community is in danger of falling apart right before the peoples' eyes. Forgiveness is an absolute must if a community is to function in a healthy way. After all, hurts and pains aren't normally the fault of just one person. It takes at least two persons to have problems between them, so to lay all the blame on just one of them - one it isn't fair, and two it isn't right.

But it is important to remember that by estranging the one charged with the fault, there is little done to recreate community again. Once a community begins using scapegoats to solve their problems,

² (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 80)

divisions usually develop throughout the community and it isn't long before the whole community is fractured with suspicion and rumors, and additional hurts occur. Then, everyone becomes the victims and the hope for a new community disappears dramatically. Forgiveness must be a part of the community if there is any healing to take place.

We see that in our Old Testament lesson of Genesis 50, where Jacob has died and the older brothers of Joseph are fearful of revenge being taken upon them for what they have done to Joseph. But Joseph understands God's part of the whole situation, and he tells his brothers, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."* And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (50:19-21). Certainly what the brothers did to Joseph was not right AT ALL. But God used it to bring about a great result. So Joseph forgave his brothers.

Imagine what would have happened had Joseph not forgiven his brothers, but rather put them through the same kind of treatment they had given to him? The history of the Israelites would probably have turned out much differently. But because forgiveness was given by Joseph, with the repentance of the brothers, there was unity in the community and love flowed freely again, with no worries about what might happen in the future. The past was forgiven, and the wrongs were atoned, and there was peace once more. The community must provide forgiveness in order for it to remain healthy enough to grow strong again.

Forgiveness is the way that allows hurts and pains to create new possibilities for growth within the community and establishing new agreements for the future. It is up to the community to provide forgiveness so that there is nurture and reward brought back into the community. So how does this happen?

Well, there are three principles that are essential in building up the community which establishes trust, warmth, confidence and the willingness to reconcile with one another. And there are three promises that help rebuild trust, reestablish communication, and provide reconciliation. The three

principles are 1) availability, 2) authenticity and 3) acceptance. The promises are 1) recognition, 2) reinforcement, and 3) rewards. Let's look at each one of these, for they are important to the life of the community as forgiveness is given.

The first principle is Availability. Friendship in a community is based upon mutual availability. The degree that persons are available to each other determines the depth of their relationship. Deep relationships have ready availability between parties. Casual relationships on the other hand have limited availability. Trust is developed by folks being available to each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In a loving community, there is an understanding of availability. As problems arise, there is the mindset that everyone has the right to the presence of others within that community. There is that confidence with each person that no matter what, they will have access to others there in that community that will support them and stand with them, even if they are a wrongdoer. It's people willing to express their availability to the other to walk with them through success or failure. It's willing to be with one another. So when wrong happens, everyone has the right to be present with one another.

The second principle here is Authenticity. It is vital that in a forgiving community that everyone is free to express their real selves to one another. This involves setting limits, affirming values, declaring wants, confronting our differences, and the freedom to express caring toward one another. A covenant between people within that community with genuine authenticity allows for both caring for individuals as well as confronting individuals within that community. So anger and appreciation can be expressed in order to continue to value one another.

Authenticity gives everyone the right to stand with one another to share in the ups and downs of human existence, as well as sharing the joy and the pain of various situations.

The third principle is Acceptance. "Caring about another, caring for another, expressing caring to another are all dimensions of solidarity within the forgiving community. To care about another is to be aware of another's pain, anger or frustration. To care for another is to offer support, understanding

and appropriate help as it is needed. To express caring to another is to put affection and appreciation into words as well as acts. As caring is offered without mixing it with judgment or evaluation, the positive regard felt is without conditions.³

Acceptance offered to all individuals within the community allow everyone to know that they count, that they have value and they regardless of the situations that cause pain or hurt, they know that they belong to that community. It is telling each person that we are willing to stand by them just because they are who they are.

When availability, authenticity and acceptance are present in the framework of that community, forgiveness can be achieved. These are absolutely essential in the community to allow it to recognize failures of persons within, to allow for the confession of any wrongdoing, to be open for repentance, and to offer the correct amends to be made and proceed toward a deeper relationship among the community. Forgiveness is so needed in our world today, but it must be done lovingly for it to deepen community.

David Augsburger expresses it well when he says, “Availability, authenticity and acceptance provide a context of caring which enables persons to give and receive confrontation. It provides the stability of support which allows us to offer and accept criticism. It creates a base of empathy and understanding upon which evaluating and advising can be built. It firms up an emotional floor of affirmation which then undergirds any assertiveness. It assures us of the constancy of love which invites us to level with each other.”

These three principles have to be present in the loving community if it expects to continue to grow deeper in trust and faith together. Without them, the community fractures and divides and there is no more community left. They model Paul’s emphasis on forgiving an offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. He says, “*Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him*” (2:7-8). So there’s not to be any ostracizing of members in a community, even if wrong has been done. Instead, love is to be shown so

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 86)

that reconciliation can be achieved and peace restored and the community can continue to grow together.

And that's why we should hear Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 in a careful way. Listen to what He say about dealing with sin in the church. This is Matthew 18:15-21 (Read Matthew 18:15-21).

Now, the community must be available to the person who sins, so that care can be shown to gently bring forgiveness into the picture. That's why Jesus tells us to go to the ones who have sinned against us and confront them of the wrong. That way the process of reconciliation can begin.

Authenticity demonstrates to that person that there are guidelines and limits that stand in the community, and that breaking them brings consequences. Addressing the person that hurts us in person shows our willingness to work through the hurt and pain so that a proper settlement of the situation can be gained. Addressing the hurts and wrongs that were done, helps the one to know that they belong to the community and that they are responsible for their part of the community.

Jesus says that the church community is to be involved in the process so that acceptance can be shown to the individual, that once repentance is offered, they are welcomed back into the congregation. The community is to recognize the willingness of the individual to make peace in the wrongdoing and welcome them back.

However, the community needs to practice the three promises for forgiveness, too. The first promise of the community is that of Recognition. The need for individuals within the community to be recognized as valued members of that community increases during the times of stress and hurt. Forgiving communities recognize the hurts and pains of folks within the community, and they work diligently to resolve those hurts. Many times the offender is hurting within themselves and their actions are just the overflow of their own hurt and pain. So to isolate that person in denial of their own value as a member of the community does not help to bring healing. Everyone needs to be recognized as persons of value; the offender needs the recognition so that repentance can be made, and the offended needs recognition so that the renewed relationship can be achieved with the offender.

People within the community have the responsibility to recognize both the offender and the

offended so that the division that has come because of the wrong done can be corrected as the connection with the community remains intact. Folks within the community can reach out to both sides and walk alongside those involved so that respect is shown as the correct steps are taken to bring resolution.

The second promise given by the community is Reinforcement. Relational pain and injury divides those within the community, and we've seen that recognition is the first step to opening up communications again. But there also needs to be reinforcement of positive steps toward reconciliation among those who are involved in the conflict. As the hurt is identified, owned and then admitted, we cannot settle for just a simple apology, but need to reinforce the process of reconciliation, so that forgiveness can be complete and resolution brings unity within the community again. Those in the process of reconciliation need encouragement so that they don't get stuck along the way and are tempted to quit.

This reinforcement of the individuals must come in a variety of ways to offset the complexity of the situation. Forgiveness is a difficult task, so reinforcement must adapt to help those involved along the way stay engaged so that reconciliation can be completed.

The community can work with the individuals involved so that everyone knows their part of the problem, preventing a one-way forgiveness from happening. The community can encourage both parties to stay in the process so that the end result is genuine love for the other and appreciation of them. The community can also encourage repentance from the wrongdoer, as they model, teach, practice and reinforce repentance. They can also help the past to be left in the past, but the learnings to influence the hopeful future for greater respect and dignity.

The last of the promises is Rewards. In order for the process of forgiveness to become complete, rewards must be recognized along the way to encourage those involved. What are they learning about each other? How are they feeling as things get expressed and eventually settled? What hope does each party have with regard to the support of the community if future failures happen? "When no lasting

rewards are given and received out of a resolution of a difference, it is not likely to produce lasting changes in behavior.”⁴

Forgiveness is a tough process, filled with lots of emotions like shame, embarrassment, isolation and avoidance. Loving communities that work to see final resolution of the problem work to offer each party rewards of encouragement so that they can finish the process and find a positive resolution.

At every step of Jesus’ guidance of dealing with sin in the community, we see that one great reward is a reuniting of every member of the community. Respect is shown to every person, and there is growing peace as each person begins to find acceptance within the community once again. And when the full process of forgiveness is completed, each one can celebrate the work done to remain together.

“Creating, sustaining and celebrating community is costly. It requires the sacrifice of safe denial ... and avoidance. In community, persons are included - not ignored; invited to explore relationships - not overlooked and evaded when they provoke tensions or exaggerate uncomfortable differences.

“The cost of community is in caring enough - caring enough to forgive - caring enough to refuse false ‘forgiveness’ - caring enough to work through repentance for past pain, recognition of the present realities, and reconstruction of our commitment for the future - caring enough to truly, fully forgive.”⁵

Is forgiveness worth the effort put into it to complete it? Yes. Is forgiveness easy? No. Does forgiveness bring closer relationships? Yes. But we have to keep the love of God in the process so that we find love for ourselves, and give love to one another. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You for showing us how to forgive each other when we bring hurt and pain to one another. Help us to learn from Jesus the way in which we can respect and love even the worst of sinners, so that we might love them back into relationship with us and with You. Teach us forgive each other and encourage us to give it our all to the process so that we might renew community among us. Help us to become Your family once more, willing to forgive in love. This we pray in Jesus’ Name.
AMEN

⁴ (David Augsberger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 90)

⁵ (Ibid., pg. 91)