

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Following Jesus 101: Love Radically 2  
January 26, 2020  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson

2 Samuel 19:18b-23; Matthew 18:21-27

I want to begin this morning with two stories...similar and yet each with a different ending. The first is Ron's story. Ron was a veteran who had learned how to do underwater welding and demolition in the navy. After the service he and a partner had opened a company that did both of those things. They were in great demand and built a very successful and profitable operation. One day though Ron got to work and there was a call on the answering machine. It was a vendor wondering why his check had bounced. Ron was surprised because he and his partner always carried enough cash to cover their bills. Once the bank opened, he called to check. What he discovered was that his partner had emptied all their accounts and vanished. Ron suddenly had no money to pay employees, vendors or to complete his companies existing contracts. In a short time his business went under. He declared bankruptcy. He lost everything. My second story is about Margaret. Margaret was a nurse who worked from almost fifty years at that occupation. She and her late husband had diligently saved for retirement. Her husband invested their funds with a broker that they trusted. Margaret's husband died young, but she continued to invest her funds with their trusted friends. Finally, in her early seventies, she decided to retire. She requested monthly withdrawals, only to find that after the first couple of payments there was no more money. Their broker had spent it all on himself in a long running Ponzi scheme. She was broke and had to go back to work. Similar stories, yet different outcomes. One of these people never got over the loss and was angry the rest of their lives. The other, managed to find joy in the midst of loss and was a light to those around her. The difference? Forgiveness.

Last week, Bethany talked about God's unconditional forgiveness. Today we are going to spend our time together learning about our call as Jesus followers to offer unconditional forgiveness as well. But before we talk about what forgiveness is, we are going to talk about what it is not. Forgiveness is not about forgetting or excusing the harm someone has done to us, or as scripture calls it, how they have sinned against us, or allowing that harm to continue. I say this because Peter's question about forgiveness comes immediately after Jesus had told the disciples how to deal with someone who has sinned against them...or if you will, hurt them. Jesus taught that you are to go to that person and let them know what they have done, asking them to repent. If that doesn't work, you are to take a friend and do the same thing. If that doesn't work, you are to go with the elders and do the same. If that doesn't work, you are to have the entire community speak with them. And if that doesn't work, you are to exclude them from the community. As I said two weeks about loving radically, it does not mean allowing others to harm and abuse us or others. So, if forgiveness is not about forgetting, excusing or allowing continued harm, what is it? The only way I can describe it, is with a visual image...an image drawn from my work in a petrochemical plant south of Houston.

I need you all to use your imaginations. I want you to see a large vessel or tank that you can see in chemical plants. At the bottom of the vessel are two large pipes. One on one side and one on the other side. One of those pipes is where raw material flows in. The other is where product flows out. At the top of the tank is a third pipe, which also contains raw material. The input pipe on the top has a valve that can allow raw material in or keep it out. Finally, on the side of the vessel is a manhole cover. Got the image? Good, so here we go. The vessel is our heart, our soul, our inner being, our core self. On good days that heart,

soul, inner being is filled through the input pipe with God's love. When this love is processed in our inner selves by the Spirit, what comes out of us is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control. These are the fruits of the Spirit which pour forth into the world. We are, as Jesus puts it, light and salt to the world. But all this changes when someone sins against us, hurts us, betrays us, abuses us. What happens is that the valve on the second input line, automatically opens. And what comes from that line is not the love of God, but it is the toxic sludge of hate, anger, bitterness and vengeance. It is a toxic slurry that begins to fill our inner selves, blocking the love God tries to pour into us, eating away at our life...and then it begins to pour out into the world. And this sludge of hate, anger, bitterness and vengeance is as toxic for the world as it is for us. So where is forgiveness in all of this?

Forgiveness is what happens when we do two things, first we intentionally shut off the valve at the top of the tank. When we make a conscience decision to refuse to allow any more hate, anger, bitterness and vengeance to enter our beings. Second, we open the manhole cover and do the hard work of cleaning out all the toxic sludge that is in us. And I say that this is hard work because it is. It takes prayer, meditation, conversation, counseling and more. It is spiritual work. It is psychological work. I say that this getting rid of the toxic sludge is forgiveness, because that is the essence of the Greek word for forgiveness. It means to get rid of, set aside, cast away. In other words, forgiveness is throwing away all that toxic mess and allowing God's love to once again fill on the inside. This is why forgiveness is unconditional, because forgiveness is self-work. It has nothing to do with the other. It has to do with us

The gift of forgiveness is twofold. First it opens the possibility of finding joy again. Forgiveness frees us. By removing the hate, anger, bitterness and vengeance, it frees us to be able allow God to fill us with all the good things that God desires for us. It allows us to find love, joy, peace, patience, goodness and kindness. It allows us to live as followers of Jesus so that we are a light to the world. Second, what it offers us the ability to restore relationships if those who hurt us are willing to seek reconciliation. For if someone seeks to confess and reconcile, it will do no good if we are still filled with the toxic sludge of hate, anger and bitterness; if we have not allowed God's love to fill us and the Spirit to refine that love within us. We can see this at work in both of our stories. King David had been humiliated by Shimei as David had fled for his life. When David returns, his companions want David to take revenge, but David refuses because he understands that God has once again made him king; God's steadfast love has filled him and so the desire for revenge is gone. David can accept Shimei's apology. The same is true in the parable Jesus tells. The King is owed what in today's world would be millions of dollars. His first inclination is to sell the man and his family as slaves. But when the man apologizes and declares he will make right the wrong he had done; the King has pity and sets aside the debt (note the similarity to forgiveness; casting aside). The King was able to set aside his hate, anger and bitterness and allow for the possibility of restoration. In neither of these stories is forgiveness about forgetting, excusing or allowing. They are about doing the hard work of cleaning out the toxic sludge so that reconciliation can happen.

And this was the difference between Ron and Margaret. Ron was never able to do this work, and so he remained bitter his whole life. Margaret was able to do this work and she found a life of joy and love once again. She was able to forgive unconditionally and in so doing was set free. My challenge to you then for this week is to be a Margaret; that if you are holding a grudge, if you are angry at someone, if you don't believe you can every forgive, do the hard work or cleaning out your inner self...and find the peace and joy that unconditional forgiveness offers.