

Season after Pentecost - Forgiveness

May 29, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Matthew 18: 21-22; 2 Corinthians 2: 1-11

Before the Reading of Scripture: Before we hear today's scripture reading a bit of background may be helpful. This portion of St. Paul's letter to the people Corinth seems to be in response to some previous events and writings. It seems that after he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he made another visit to deal with one or more issues that were continuing to tear at the unity of the Christian community in Corinth. It "appears that someone had mistreated Paul during that previous visit."¹ Whether it was challenging Paul's credibility, theology, character or authority, we do not know, though it does appear not many of the other Corinthians came to Paul's defense at the time." Paul had promised to return after that "painful visit, but later decided to send them a letter instead — a "painful" letter that they interpreted as a harsh rebuke."² It is a letter of which we do not have a copy.

In chapter seven of Second Corinthians we learn Paul received word through Titus that many of the Corinthian Christians were remorseful about what had happened during Paul's last visit. Most of the community strongly reprimanded the person who created the problem. Now, what you will hear is Paul's response.

May the spoken and written word lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I invite you to look at the front cover of your worship bulletin. What you see is called a "tag cloud." This tag cloud is a stylized way of visually representing the occurrences of words used in today's Bible text. The most frequently used words and topics are highlighted by the size and boldness of their letters. When the eleven verses from today's reading were analyzed it produced this "tag cloud." As you can see, the most frequent and pronounced theme was..... *(Wait for response. Ask for it to be repeated)* PAIN.

Pain is the natural response to being hurt. Whether you are injured by stubbing your toe or passing a kidney stone, whether you're injured by a remark or betrayal there is pain. Sometimes the pain is fleeting: the pain in your stubbed toe goes away after a few mighty curses and walking it off. Other times the pain has longer term effects: the stubbed toes is broken and you're off to the emergency room or podiatrist. It's true with the emotional pain we feel, too. I can now quickly get over the bruise to my ego when the umpteenth store clerk initially addresses me as "Sir." Ouch! But the pain of a broken relationship or the

death of my parents, those aren't hurts that disappear with a little self-talk or wishful thinking. Pain in any case is real. As many of us have learned the hard way, denial or ignoring pain is costly to our bodies, relationships and churches.

Paul was hurt by a person and the community at Corinth but he knew there was much more at stake than his feelings. In this letter he is trying to address the pain he and the Corinthians have experienced. Paul realized that not going to see them face to face may have caused the Corinthians pain if they thought he was shaking them off like dust on his feet, giving up on them. He wants them to know that wasn't and isn't the case. He now also knows his previous "painful" letter had an impact on the church but it seems there might also be some misunderstanding about his reasoning and expectations. Paul tells them: *"For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."*

That sounds awfully close to a parent or doctor saying, "I'm sorry this is going to hurt but it's for your own good." When you're a kid you think that sounds like a bunch of hooley. But when YOU are the loving, responsible adult who has to take your child or pet in for the shot or procedure that will cause them to cry, panic, scream, you know those words can be sincere and true. Truth *can* be used as an intentional weapon to hurt another. But truth can also hurt when offered in love with the hope of preventing greater pain or further division. That seems to be one of the things Paul is helping the Corinthians learn.

Instead of a visit, Paul sent a letter about the wrong done by a member of their community and it's damage and dangers. But, as their pastor, as the person who had taught them about Jesus, as one of the missionaries the Holy Spirit had used to bring them into the Christian faith, Paul does not want this wrong to become a stumbling block to their faith or an elephant in the room of their relationship or an opening for the

Adversary to plant seeds of doubt, despair or deceit. Truth can hurt but it also can set us free from far greater dangers. The people of Corinth took to heart what Paul wrote in that “painful letter.” Many seemed to understand and “rebuked the person who had created the problem —whatever it was.”³ Paul wants them to also notice that the incident didn’t just hurt him. The wrong action by one person toward another endangers the peace and unity of a community, its relationships and mission. Joined together in Christ, the joy or hurt, the sin or good deed of one affects all.

You might think Paul would express a bit of self-righteous glee about that “majority” who rebuked the one who hurt him and caused problems in Corinth. Instead, Paul warns, *“This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he many not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.”* Paul, their pastor and teacher, wants them to know there is a difference between holding someone accountable and vengeance. Asking someone who has wronged to take responsibility for their actions and consequences is one thing. But continuing to punish and marginalize that person who has been held accountable is unjust. God’s kind of justice is about restoring not retaliation and we are called to reflect our Lord. So Paul asks them to forgive, comfort and love the one who has been disciplined. Do you see why our faith is so very radical and counter cultural? Facing truth and confronting wrong as a followers of Christ calls us beyond our personal feelings to the affects on our community? Facing truth and confronting wrong as a followers of Christ pushes us to seek peace and restore relationship rather than perpetuate pain and vengeance. That is not the way most people think. That is not how our justice and prison system works in

reality. That is certainly not our initial reaction toward someone who has caused us pain. How might this balancing of holding accountable and forgiving look in action?

Apartheid became the official, government policy in the Republic of South Africa in 1948. Under apartheid, the rights, associations, and movements of the majority black inhabitants and other ethnic groups were curtailed. The white minority who controlled the government and military, enforced laws and policies of segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups. After years of internal and international opposition, apartheid was finally dismantled, culminating with elections in 1994, the first in South Africa with universal suffrage. Nelson Mandela, who himself had been arrested, jailed, and tortured under apartheid, was elected president and knew the country faced a huge challenge. How do you unify a people who have been divided so long, with centuries of mutual suspicions and pain? How do you bring together those who suffered oppression and those who oppressed? How do you deal with the oppressors and liberation rebels who inflicted crimes of inhumanity on others? After many wars, tribunals have convened to prosecute and punish those who committed crimes against humanity. The Nuremberg Trials after World War II is an example.

In 1995 the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* was created by Nelson Mandela's Government of National Unity to help South Africans come to terms with their extremely troubled past. "The South African government reasoned that a tribunal based solely on punishment and awarding amnesty for political acts and offenses during apartheid would ignore victims' needs to have their stories heard. Moreover, government reasoned, the entire nation needed to hear the stories of the pain suffered under apartheid, to admit mistakes, and to heal. In the words of the Act that created the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 'Gross violations of human rights ... can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding, but not for vengeance.'"⁴

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu was appointed the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Investigating violations that took place between 1960 and 1994, the Commission held a series of hearings throughout the country over three years. Over 15,000 statements from victims of gross human rights violations and their perpetrators were gathered. The Commission received and responded to over 7,000 requests for amnesty. It provided support and reparation to victims and their families. It strived to compile a full and objective record of the effects of apartheid on South African society. Was it successful? The jury is still out.

What remains significant is that when the oppressed majority of South Africa's were freed to respond to years of injustice and atrocities, the choice was to practice restorative justice rather than simple retributive punishment. People, on either side of the conflict, were to be held responsible for their inhumane actions. Just as important was the deliberate choosing of a process that might build mutual understanding, peace and unity See if you hear St. Paul's ideas in these words from Archbishop Tutu:

"Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing."⁵

When St. Paul and the Corinthian church were confronted with a wrong, he was urging them to follow Jesus in a pathway leading to real, not superficial, healing, restoration and unity. And if following Jesus isn't a good enough reason to do so, then Paul wanted to remind us that when we leave wounds untended in our community or relationships, they open a door for the Adversary to enter. *"[Forgive] so that we many not be outwitted by Satan: for we are not ignorant of his designs."* (2:11) For where there is lingering resentment, grudges and bitterness, there is fertile ground for the Adversary to sow doubt, discouragement, disillusionment, discontent, discord and despair in our hearts, lives and communities. Those tricks of the Adversary erode our trust of God, and create a chasm between us and the Lord and one another.

That word PAIN, so prominent in the tag cloud on our bulletin cover is being closely chased by the words FORGIVENESS and MADE. St. Paul certainly lays out a challenge for us today. Once we've made or experienced pain, what will we make of it? More pain or forgiveness? We who receive the unearned, undeserved forgiveness of God through Christ, are told by Jesus to forgive seventy times seven times. (Matt. 18:22). How is such genuine-not-superficial forgiveness possible? To get to reconciliation will mean walking through painful truths in love. But do not confuse forgiveness with accepting or condoning the painful wrong you experienced. Do not confuse forgiveness with pretending it's okay or being shielded from facing consequence. And do not think you can do it on your own. When we follow Jesus down the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, seeking or offering forgiveness when there has been pain, we tap into the very power of God, the Great, Merciful Healer. Our Lord, Master of restoring darkness to light and death into life, will provide the strength and pathway as we follow Jesus who forgave those who crucified him. That was what Paul

was working toward with the Corinthians and what he hoped they would work toward with one another. What of us, Paul asks? What hurts and divisions in our lives, families and nation need our attention, so that the powers of the Adversary are thwarted and there can be new life and healing? Do not be afraid. We are not on our own, Draw near to our Lord who forgives and frees, restores and makes new and will empower us to move through pain to peace and life-giving possibilities. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 5/28/16

ENDNOTES

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1. Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 2. Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 3. Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 4. <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/peace-makers/820>
 5. Desmond Tutu, "Truth and Reconciliation" September 1, 2004 posted on http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/truth_and_reconciliation