

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“On the Job Training: Practicing Forgiveness”
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Psalm 118:19-25, John 20:19-23

It was absurd. That is really the only word you can use to describe it; absurd. It was absurd that Jesus gives his disciples the power and responsibility to forgive or not to forgive sins. To quote Jesus, “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained.” Seriously! Seriously Jesus is going to give his disciples this much power; the power to forgive or retain sins? These are the guys and gals who had just deserted him; pretended that they did not know him; doubted that he had been raised from the dead; had pretty much forgotten everything they had been taught by him. And now he is going to give them this unbelievable power? Well the answer is yes he is. In a sense what Jesus does is deputize the disciples. Just as in old westerns, where the sheriff deputizes people, giving them the same authority he has, Jesus does the same. The disciples have been deputized to forgive or not to forgive sins. My guess is that the disciples must have thought this was above their pay grade because, after all, only God could forgive; well, and maybe Jesus. Even so, whether those folks liked it, wanted it, or felt up to it, Jesus put it in their job description...giving and withholding forgiveness was now their call...and it is our call as well.

That’s right my friends, you and I are those who have been deputized as well. We have been given the job of forgiving or retaining sins. Some of you may appreciate this and are thinking of all the people whose sins you might want to retain...yeah that guy is never going to get forgiveness. Others of you however may have the same reaction as some of the disciples might have had, why are you picking on me? I say this because just like the disciples, we are less than perfect people. We are people who sin, who make mistakes, who say things we regret, who do things that hurt others and who never fully understand why people do what they do...so why should we be saddled with this task. It is above our pay grade. It is out of our wheelhouse. It is...you get the point. Why would God entrust us with such an overwhelming task? The answer, if you want to know, is that that I have no idea why Jesus would do so. What I do know though is that we have been called by and given the power of Jesus to forgive sins. The only question is what will we do with it?

I ask that question because there are two ways that we can use this power that we have been given. The first way is that we can use it to control others, which is how the church has often used this power. What I mean by this is that the church essentially says we will only offer you forgiveness when you do what we want you to do. As long as you don’t break any of our rules you are forgiven. If you break them you are not. As long as you believe what you are supposed to believe we will forgive you. If you don’t we won’t. As long as you recognize that we alone have the power to forgive or to withhold forgiveness then we will forgive you. Otherwise we won’t and you will be lost. My guess is that most of us have used forgiveness in this way. We forgive those who apologize. We forgive those who ask for forgiveness...and otherwise we withhold it because this seems fair.

The second way in which this gift and power can be used is to give it away to all who need it in order to set them free, without any preconditions. This is the difficult way, in fact a way that for many of us makes little sense, yet it is the way that Jesus offered forgiveness. I say this because this is the way that Jesus gave it away on the cross. Jesus didn't say to the Romans who crucified him, "Hey guys. I will forgive you if you apologize." No he simply forgave them. Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery without her ever having expressed any regret. It is only after he forgives her that he tells her to not do it again. Jesus gave it away without condition, so perhaps this is the way we ought to give it away believing that forgiveness has a power to set people free. Oh, and the second half of Jesus' statement that if you retain the sins of any they are retained? All that is, is a reminder of what happens when we fail to give forgiveness away; people end up trapped in their pasts rather than being set free by the grace of God.

Shaka was a smart kid. He was on the honor roll. He had dreams of going to medical school. Then one day, standing on a street corner here in Detroit, he was shot three times. He was rushed to the hospital and survived. As he tells his story that event profoundly changed him. He decided that it was better to be the shooter than the shoo-tee. He became involved in selling drugs and carrying a gun. Then at the age of nineteen he killed a man. Convicted of second-degree murder he was sent to prison for twenty years. When Shaka arrived in prison he was angry. This was all someone else's fault. Once inside he dealt in smuggled drugs, and contraband. For his continuing efforts he then spent seven years in solitary confinement. While he was there several factors changed his life...the first and in some ways one of the most important was a letter he received from a relative of the man he killed. In it, the relative said that she forgave him. It was in that moment, he said, that for the first time, he even considered that he might be forgivable and that his worst deeds would not define him forever. Today Shaka, after spending almost twenty years in prison, teaches and speaks around the country, helping youth and adults to make better choices in life. He is also working with a national bipartisan initiative that hopes to cut the prison population in half by 2025. Someone forgave his sins, they were forgiven and a new life was born. This is part of what he wrote in his latest book, "We can never know the power that a word of kindness and or an act of forgiveness will have on the person who needs it the most."

Forgiveness is never easy. It is difficult. And it is more difficult when the one who needs forgiving refuses to acknowledge that they have done wrong, or when they continue a pattern of hurtful and harmful behavior. Even so you and I are called upon to forgive; to forgive like the relative of the man Shaka killed, to forgive like Jesus forgave, believing that the gift of forgiveness is one that can change lives for the good.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, who in my life do I need to forgive, and then go and do it. Send them a note, an email, call them on the phone, meet with them in person and forgive. They might not think they need it, or want it, yet in so doing you are practicing forgiving as we have been called to do.