**WEST CENTER CONGREGTIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

**September 17, 2017**

***As We Forgive***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE WITNESS OF ST PAUL** Romans 14:1-12 St Paul teaches the importance of not judging others, but rather, living in unity, honoring and giving thanks to the Lord. I believe the most important verses in today’s epistle are these: *“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”*

**THE NOW TESTAMENT WITNESS**

The Now Testament Witness for today is a witty little poem by Robert Frost called “Fire and Ice” that I have always enjoyed, at least before the days of climate change debate.

Some say the world will end in fire

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 18:21-35

This is the story of two slaves, their king, and the Lord’s Prayer.

**SERMON**

Jesus does not pray the Lord’s Prayer in today’s Gospel witness, but the story that Jesus tells provides the perfect occasion to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

We say these words so routinely every Sunday that we may no longer hear the words or no longer think about the meaning of forgiving others, as we have been forgiven.

There is a delicious irony in this story. Did you notice it? Although the story teaches us to forgive those who sin against us, not seven times, but seventy-seven times, the king does not forgive his slave for not forgiving the other slave’s relatively minor debt, although the first slave himself had been forgiven.

The first slave had had a massive amount of debt forgiven, the equivalent of $10 million dollars today. But for some selfish reason the first slave would not forgive the second slave’s relatively miniscule debt of $20. The first slave threw the second slave into prison until he would pay.

Talk about a tightwad, a tightwad who ends up being punished by the angry king to pay and pay highly for his lack of empathy and generosity. The first slave is tortured until he pays his entire debt.

So Jesus’ teaching is that while most things are forgivable, being unforgiving is not forgivable since we ourselves have been forgiven.

One of the main teachings of our Christian faith is called the atonement, which means that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are forgiven of our sins.

When we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” we are reminding God that we are forgiven through our faith in Jesus, and we are reminding ourselves, that we are to forgive our debtors, as our debts have been forgiven. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

And why is forgiveness so central to our faith?

Because “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” St. Paul writes in Romans 3:22b-25.

*“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. God did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.”*

Forgiveness is central to our faith because God knows that we are unable to live 24/7 as God would have us live. And so God graciously forgives us, forgives us through the gift of our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Forgiveness is central to our faith because not to forgive is deadly, deadly to our relationship with God, as well as deadly to our own hearts and minds and spirits -- and deadly to our relationships.

When we do not forgive, we may hurt the other person a bit. He or she may miss our company or being in contact with us and may feel regret or sorrow at the loss. But somehow they are able to go on with their lives with less of a sense of anger than the anger and loss that we experience.

When we don’t forgive, our anger over the trespass, our anger at the other person, lives and even grows within us, and we become less able to love, less able to laugh, less able to live.

When we don’t forgive as we have been forgiven, the anger within us cries like a baby, cries like a baby to be nursed, and so the misdeeds against us are remembered and perhaps even shared, as in “Do you remember the time that XYZ did ABC to me? I will never speak to them again!”

But in stating our anger and our distance, we are keeping the situation alive, and in essence, speaking in anger to the offending party.

Forgiveness is difficult. Forgiveness is tricky. Look at how God chooses to forgive us, by the life, death, and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

Remember the old saying, “Forgive and forget?” Well, I don’t believe that we forgive by forgetting. If we have been seriously wronged, we don’t forget it. We can’t forget it even if we try. That old devil anger keeps coming up when we least expect it, out of our control.

We forgive by making peace, making peace with the other person, if possible, or by making peace with the situation, if making peace with the other person is impossible.

If we have something painful going on between ourselves and a family member or close friend, writing a note or making a call, saying that we miss the other person and would like to renew if not restore the relationship, if the other person would like that too, can start a healing.

Meeting to discuss the issue might be painful, but it will be less painful than nursing anger over time. And sometimes, we can suggest each of us saying we are sorry, and go on from there, without rehearsing the old hurts and resultant pain. Jesus wants us to live fully and joyfully, and forgiving others as we have been forgiven helps us on our journey, eliminating emotional roadblocks and dead ends.

But if a stranger or at the least someone who is not a close friend or family member trespasses against us, trespasses against us by hurting us or hurting or even killing someone who is near and dear to us, forgiveness is something else again.

It takes a saint to say, “I forgive,” to someone who has killed another person, especially a child. Some people are able to say, “I forgive,” almost immediately; others take awhile, and still others keep crying out for vengeance, if not eternal torture in hell for the perpetrator.

Some people go to speak with the assailant in prison, especially if the person has expressed remorse for their deed. But I don’t know if I am forgiving enough to do that, much as I might like to.

What I might do is what it seems a lot of parents of murdered children do: develop a program or even a foundation so that the deceased will not have died in vain, that other people will be protected or their lives enhanced because their own lov3ed one lived.

I call this “making peace” with the situation, so that anger may be diminished and life can go on. There will never be closure (whatever that means), but there may eventually be a sense of God’s blessing, somehow, somewhere, if we make peace.

One family I know who lost a young child due to a sudden fatal illness, continues to include him when they speak about their children. They recognize his birthday each year as a special occasion. Their other children have heard stories about their little brother, and experience him as part of the family, living in their minds and hearts.

I don’t know if there was medical malpractice involved in the little boy's death. But I do believe that the parents’ feelings of anger and loss have diminished over the years with the help of their faith, God’s grace, and by keeping the memory of their son alive.

So in summary, I suggest that we ponder Jesus’ story about the two slaves and the king, and that we try to follow Jesus’ teaching about forgiving others, as we have been forgiven, realizing that in some cases we may have to ask God to forgive the other party on our behalf.

Today’s Gospel Witness opens with Jesus’ disciple Peter coming to Jesus with this question: *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”*

Jesus tells Peter a story. If I had the chance, I would skip the story and answer Peter with two questions of my own: “Peter, how many times do you want to be forgiven? How many times has God forgiven you?”

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

*Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive*

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