

THE FORGIVENESS BUSINESS – FOR HEALING

I hope some of you will find this sermon enlightening, maybe even helpful. Others may need to practice their forgiveness skills by forgiving me for this sermon. Either way, I want to set before you more evidence than is usually possible in our normal Sunday-morning, twenty-minute, one-Scripture-passage-at-a-time approach to the Gospel story. How well do you know your Bible? Most of you better than you think. What is the interaction between Jesus and those He encounters? Keep your eye on the forgiveness theme, and hang on.

What is – and what is not – a forgiveness problem?

ZACCHAEUS: He is the tax collector in Jericho who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus and then says, *“Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”* Jesus replies, *“Today salvation has come to this house – for this man too is a son of Abraham.”* (Luke 19:8-9) Giving half of his goods to the poor is a *huge* amend. People do not make amends unless they are repentant. Zacchaeus was hated by the citizens of Jericho, but now he is restored to the community – forgiven. This is a story about forgiveness and restoration. But it takes Jesus to pull it off.

PETER: In the wake of a huge catch of fish, Peter says to Jesus, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”* (Luke 5:8) The first level of forgiveness restores Peter and turns him into an apostle – a fisher of men. After many blunders and many good things also (after the cock crows; after the Resurrection), there is a breakfast on the shores of Galilee, where a broken Peter has gone back to his old life. Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus invites him to confess his love three times. And Peter is forgiven and restored to his apostleship, only with more authority than ever before. This is a story about forgiveness and restoration – and many layers deep. But it takes Jesus to pull it off.

MARY MAGDALENE: We are told that Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary. (Mark 16:9) We know that Jesus would not have left her house swept and clean, waiting for the demons to return with more friends than ever. (Luke 11:24-25) Mary has repented, and her life is filled with different values and purposes than she ever had

before. She is one of Jesus' best disciples, but she has also been forgiven and healed. It is a story of forgiveness and restoration. Only, it takes Jesus to pull it off.

NICODEMUS: He is a member of the Sanhedrin. He comes by night to visit Jesus. He is dumbfounded by what he hears and feels in the presence of Jesus. He learns that he must be born anew to enter the Kingdom of God. This is one of the most respected, upright people in all of Israel. If there is nothing wrong – if there is no need to repent – why does he need to be born anew? I do not think Nicodemus can fathom it all for a while. But it sinks deep in the end. Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus after the crucifixion. He brings myrrh and aloes enough to bury the whole Sanhedrin. Sometimes amends make no sense, but we do the best we can anyway. And Nicodemus cuts himself out of Passover by touching a dead body on Friday afternoon, with insufficient time for purification before Passover begins. It doubtless ruined his career, but he does not care any longer. He has been born anew – *truly* forgiven and restored. Only, it takes Jesus to pull it off.

Jesus teaches and heals everywhere He goes. Nobody is standing up waving a banner and declaring that all of these encounters have a common denominator – a repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins. But each story is about the restoration of each person's relationship with God. That is what matters, and that is what makes the difference. Sometimes people refuse the forgiveness and do not get healed. (The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-23); the guy at the Pool of Bethesda who wanted to go on begging rather than go back to work (John 5:2-17).) Nevertheless, whether positive or negative, repentance and the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of each person's relationship with God are at the core of every encounter people have with Jesus. I have mentioned only a few of these encounters. Please track the others until you see the pattern.

And from the Cross, Jesus says: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" It is one of the last things Jesus ever says, until after the Resurrection. PLEASE DO NOTICE: People are being forgiven and healed all through the ministry of Jesus. It is not the Cross that activates repentance or forgiveness or healing. The crucifixion and Resurrection extend Jesus' invitation for us to come into the Kingdom – extend it for all of us who had no opportunity for an encounter with Jesus during His earthly ministry. And also notice that no person anywhere, at any time during the many long years since the crucifixion

and Resurrection, gets one iota of blessing or benefit from the Cross or Resurrection *until or unless* they repent and are led into forgiveness.

We are in the forgiveness business – not in the morals business; not in the judgment business. We are in the FORGIVENESS BUSINESS.

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I am hopeful that you will see the forgiveness theme and realize its true importance as we talk about the paralytic this morning. Many people think the story of the paralytic is an isolated, one-time incident. It helps them to slough it off when they are offended or puzzled by what Jesus says as He heals this man. Hopefully many of us will get deeper than the offense this morning.

But first a story of my own. Back to my first parish in Paxton, Massachusetts. Many of you know the name Channing Washburn, the GP – the “country doctor” – in Paxton who became a dear friend. We had a mutual acquaintance named Olive Jenkins, who was a member of our church, and Channing had known her a lot longer than I had. Olive had serious abdominal problems. Channing and his associates had operated four times, but each time, adhesions would form and eventually block things up again. Now they had scheduled a fifth operation, but Channing came to me, knowing I was her Pastor, and he said something like: “I know you care about Olive, but I have known her much longer than you have, and we have always had an honest relationship. I don’t want you telling her that she will recover or get better from this operation. We will do the best we can, but we know the adhesions will form again sooner than ever, and there is nothing more that we can do. Olive will die. She is a very brave woman, and she deserves to know what is coming.”

It would not have crossed my mind to ignore or dispute what Channing was telling me. But of course I did visit Olive in the hospital. She had been raised a Catholic in New England, and despite her humor and very big heart, she had a background with lots of guilt at the core. My memory is not perfect, but in trying to be comforting, I read her a passage from Romans – the eighth chapter. In those days, Catholics did not read the Bible. Priests discouraged it, and especially Paul’s letter to the Romans. Romans is a complex epistle, to be sure. But parts of the eighth chapter are golden:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

Olive was entranced by this whole passage, which she had never really heard before. She kept asking me more and more questions about it. I needed to get on with my day, but she was comfortable in her hospital bed and had nothing better to do than to keep this conversation going – a thing she was very skilled at anyway.

I knew it was a very interesting conversation, but I had no idea what was really going on in Olive's head. Not long afterward, Channing came storming into my office as furious as I have ever seen him. "I went out of my way," he said, "to tell you not to fill Olive with any false hope. Now she tells me that after talking to you, she knows she has been forgiven and healed, and that we should sharpen our knives and make it a good one, because she is out of there for good."

I was dumbfounded. I mean, you cannot even read a simple little Scripture passage without getting into trouble? If I had been more faithful, perhaps I would have been guilty. But I was more surprised than Channing was angry. As it turned out, this *was* Olive's last operation. She came out of the hospital and lived for another thirty-five years. Meanwhile, of course, she told all her friends that I was the one who had healed her – in Jesus' name, of course, but nevertheless. I finally went to Olive and said, "Will you please shut the fuck up about this. You are making my life impossible." She just laughed and said, "Too bad, but you deserve it. You helped me to finally believe in the love and forgiveness of God." I have other stories that involve Olive Jenkins, but they are not for today. When we see things happen before our very own eyes, sometimes it helps us to hear some of the biblical stories in a different way.

And so finally, to our main Scripture passage. Is there anything here for us to learn? Jesus is not healing on His own authority. He is not healing willy-nilly or by whim or just because He happens to feel like it. "*The power of God was with him to heal the sick.*" (Luke 5:17) The New Testament Gospels are not confused about Jesus being God;

that comes years and years later. In the New Testament, Jesus is God's *Messiah* – an unbelievably obedient and trusting Servant, Agent, Son, Messenger. But Jesus is not God, and such a claim would have angered Him greatly. "*Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.*" (Luke 18:19)

Nevertheless, Jesus is God's Messiah, and Jesus has received much authority from God. In this story of the paralytic, Jesus is declaring that He has received authority on earth to forgive sins. He would agree, of course, that only God has the authority to forgive sins. But God can *delegate* this authority to others if God wishes to do that. And God does wish to do that. The proof is that this paralytic gets up and walks.

We are troubled, if we think about it for very long, because Jesus seems to be equating physical healing with the forgiveness of sins. That takes us pretty quickly to many places where we do not wish to go. We know some people for whom we have little respect, and they do not have any physical problems that we know of. And we know others who are living saints in our eyes, and they carry all manner of physical ailments. Some of them have died. Others will, we know – and probably before we will. To equate forgiveness with physical well-being seems crass, untrue, and wrong to us. (Have I lost anybody so far?)

A few years ago this congregation lost Cindy Haug, among others. Cindy was a saint in my eyes. When I was here before, I thought she had been healed – on three different occasions. She did too, at least the first two times. But each time the disease returned. And we were not playing "Poor Johnny One Note." We searched for the missing piece. What was the forgiveness not reaching? We never found it, at least not for this dimension. It challenged but never destroyed Cindy's faith. She found great forgiveness, as anyone who knows the connection between forgiveness and love can testify. But we did not get to have it our way. Not yet. Sometimes patient endurance is the only move we have left. As Job said, "*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.*" That is not a whistling in the dark. The trust comes from years of experiencing the love and mercy, the presence and guidance, the acceptance and approval of our Lord. Not having everything come up roses in this estranged and broken world is not enough to throw us off our Path.

In any case, temporary defeats do not mean we lose sight of the pattern. Jesus also died. Paul was executed. Peter was crucified upside down. Our world does not know all the dimensions of God. But we do know the pattern that Jesus reveals to us: repentance, forgiveness, healing. Sometimes this pattern gets interrupted. Sometimes it does not work as perfectly as we were hoping. But this is still the pattern, and the power of God moves along these lines, according to these principles.

How do we know? Because we watch all the people that Jesus healed. We match this with our own experience, which most of the time flows along these same lines. If we truly repent – turn and head toward God’s Kingdom – we receive forgiveness, and forgiveness means the restoration of our relationship with God. But we are not neophytes. There are many dimensions and many layers of repentance. There are many dimensions to the forgiveness that comes from repentance. And there are many layers of healing between us and true wholeness – the true fullness of love and trust between us and God.

“That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” (Matthew 2:10) Do not leave it half heard or half understood. *“That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth ... to restore the full relationship between you and God.”* That is what heals us. That is when we rise and walk.