

THE FORGIVENESS BUSINESS – FOR LOVE

We are not in the morals business. We are not in the judgment business. We are in the forgiveness business. At least if we are into the Christian Life, trying to walk the Christian Path, then forgiveness is what we are needing and wanting for ourselves and for others.

“Wait a minute,” some of you are saying. “I thought we were supposed to be about love. Love is supposed to be the product we are after.” Maybe so, but you will not find that in the Sermon on the Mount or in the Lord’s Prayer. Yet *forgiveness* is at the very center of both. And as we will learn from today’s Scripture passage, love comes from forgiveness, not the other way around.

Many stories and teachings in the New Testament make this clear, but perhaps none any better than this story of the woman who weeps at Jesus’ feet as He reclines for a meal in the house of this Pharisee.

Perhaps we should begin by trying to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven minus any possibility of forgiveness. That is flat-out impossible, at least for me. Mercy, grace, and forgiveness are so deeply ingrained in my notions and experience of the Christian Path that trying to envision a Heaven without forgiveness reverts very quickly to a description of Hell. Indeed, if we go behind the symbols of fire and punishment to the spiritual realities they point toward, then without forgiveness we are in a realm of pride, loneliness, isolation, self-righteousness – a realm which has no use for and no possibility of love.

Some people think Jesus dashes off parables and teachings willy-nilly, according to whatever happens to come into His head at the moment. It can look that way from a casual glance at the stories He tells and the encounters He is having. Sometimes pros make things look easy because they have become so familiar with the patterns and principles on which things depend that it seems effortless to onlookers. Rodger Whitten can transpose a hymn or a solo up a step or up a half step or down, into a better range, and we do not even notice. The scales are so incorporated into his consciousness that the flats and sharps all readjust in his mind instantaneously. But few musicians can do that even if they are very accomplished in all the usual ways.

When Jesus tells parables, they stay true to the patterns and principles of the Kingdom. Some of them seem outlandish to us, because we still think in earthly terms. We try to understand, but we keep hitting the wrong sharps or flats because we keep trying to mix two different scales. I keep trying to suggest that it would help us to get the concepts clearer. But lots of people think that's too much work, too theoretical, or maybe not entertaining enough. Let somebody else play the music of the Christian Life, and we will just sing along from time to time when the mood strikes us.

“He who is forgiven little, loves little.” I would not have come up with that in a thousand years. I still do a double take when I hear this story. What has forgiveness got to do with love?

We have been talking of late about some core principles of the Christian Life and Message. *“A repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins shall be proclaimed to all nations in Jesus’ name.”* (These are almost the last words in Luke’s Gospel.) But Jesus begins His ministry announcing (as John the Baptist had announced before Him), *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* That is not just off the top of His head. I know more than a few church members who hear this as familiar New Testament jargon, yet they have never personally tried it. That is, they have never really become serious about *repenting* themselves. Maybe someday, if they ever really need to, but they think they have other more important matters to tend to first. Yes, except we absolutely cannot enter the Christian Life – cannot walk the Christian Path – if we have not repented.

For some of you, the Christian concepts are still fuzzy. You think “repentance” is what to *do* if you feel really remorseful about some bad deed you have done, or that it is feeling sorry about something you have done. In Disciple Bands, I keep trying to help people to get clearer about our Christian vocabulary. Times change, culture moves on, and we muck up some pretty important words and concepts. SIN means separation, alienation, *distance* from God. FAITH is much clearer to us if we translate it as TRUST. MEEK does not mean weak or being a doormat; Jesus thought the most obedient and fearless spiritual warriors would inherit the earth, but we have turned it all around backward. HUMBLE does not mean you have a low self-image; it means you know your need of God – you really want a strong and conscious relationship *with God* at the center of your life.

I know that some of you do not think I know what I am talking about. That's always fair. But the rest of you need to pay at least enough attention so that you can try it on and see if it works for yourselves.

Okay: From repentance, to forgiveness, to the restoration of a personal relationship with God. That's our Path.

The core of repentance is to turn and go in a new direction. In our language, as mentioned earlier, "repentance" most often means to be sorry for a mistake or a misdeed, especially if this hurt somebody else. Of course, that *is* important; if we do not acknowledge or admit (or confess) our mistakes, we are bound to repeat them.

But deeper than sorrow for our mistakes is the awareness of a possibility, a choice – a chance to head in a different direction. At its core, that is what "repentance" really means: to stop going in the direction in which we are heading, and to turn our self and our whole life in a different direction. In the Christian language, for instance, "to repent" means we turn toward God's Kingdom, instead of going on toward our own success, our own purpose, our own aggrandizement, our own security.

The direction in which we are heading has huge impact on our behavior. This is a principle that is vague and obtuse to many in our culture. Why is the first commandment about how focused we should be on pleasing only God? Alignment of our wills to please God is the only hope we have for escaping idolatry. The alignment of our lives – the direction we choose to move in – is inescapably connected to our destination.

Some of us try for years to fix all the little things, to correct all the mistakes, to improve all the character flaws, but we keep heading in the same direction; we keep heading toward what *we* want and what *we* think will make us happy or successful or important, and we do not even ask what God might want from us or from our lives. So we keep making the same mistakes over and over again, just minor variations on the same theme, because the direction has not changed. To repent means to turn and head in a different direction.

If we know the principles of the Kingdom, we know that there is no forgiveness until we head in a different direction. "*A repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins*" is the principle. But in our day,

we have to translate: We turn and head toward God’s Kingdom, and therefore God is *able* to forgive us without coercion. God is *able* to align our lives with his purpose – because we have set aside our old goals. So the alienation and separation between us and God begin to heal. The relationship between us and God begins to be restored. That is what forgiveness means; that is what it is about. The energy flow changes. God’s presence with us feels very different when we are no longer antagonists. The new direction of repentance means we live for different goals, have different desires, hold different purposes.

This is all very theoretical to talk about. But all of this was obvious, even elementary, to Jesus. His parables and teachings are alive with these principles and patterns.

Today’s story is a wondrous illustration. Why does Jesus link love with forgiveness? Jesus knows that all authentic love comes from God, just as He knows that only God has the authority to forgive sins. If God is the source of all genuine love and we are trying to claim that *we* are loving by our own inner goodness or because of our own magnanimous hearts, then it is a very warped and cut-back kind of love. Have any of you ever been loved by another human who thought they were doing a wonderful job of loving you, but that was not what you were experiencing?

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Repentance leads to forgiveness, which restores (strengthens, makes right) our relationship with God. If we are not forgiven, the estrangement – the strain and stress between us and God – continues. Therefore we are still cut off from the love of God, or at least the filters and blocks and impediments are still active between us and God. So the love is mostly filtered out or corrupted, or worse.

Jesus says, “*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*” Not mysterious at all, if we think Jesus knows His own truth. Jesus sees all of life in terms of the essential awareness of a relationship between each one of us and God. In our so-called modern world, where so many people think they have graduated from any true or essential need for God, this makes little or no sense. Many moderns are not even sure there is a Creator, never mind knowing about any important or essential relationship between the Creator and the creatures – the children. Hence we assume that our “love” is our own, that we are the source

of our love, and that we are therefore in control of how much to give, who to give it to, and what the content should be. Maybe that is part of what is wrong with our world.

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Once we see it, it is difficult to unsee it. It is hard to understand why so much of Christendom keeps going vague and misty about what Jesus is proclaiming and inviting us into. So the Message keeps getting turned back into rules and structures that are full of judgments and morals and condemnations ... until we go on finding new ways to duplicate all the things that Jesus hated: priests in long robes, saying long prayers; minor details being turned into major barriers between us and each other, as well as between us and God. Until we can even crucify God's Messiah – while being careful not to break any Sabbath laws, because that might displease God. Wonder of wonders, even those who love Jesus most do not seem to notice how deep and horrible that irony is. We keep rules and traditions to please God, but we hate and kill the Messiah that God sent to lead us out of darkness and into LIFE.

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When I watch Jesus with people and when I listen to His stories and parables about people, I realize that there is something wrong, or at least very incomplete, about my definitions of love. It has caused me to ponder sometimes what people mean when they say they love *me*. There is such a wide spectrum there that I end up realizing that love is not generic. A few people “love me” without any content or significance whatsoever. Whatever they think it means, it does not change anything for me. If they withdraw it or forget about it, I sense no loss. You have been loved this way too, have you not?

What do people mean when they say they love me? “I want you to know I care about you,” and sometimes a follow-up, “And please care back for me”? “I find you useful; please continue”? “I sense something in you that connects with things in me that call me onward and give me hope”? Love never fits into our neat little word packages, does it? It's not possible to explain it very well, but I am trying to get you to think more about what people *mean* when they say they love you. Do any two of them mean the same thing?

Naturally we also start wondering what people think *we* mean when we say we love *them*. And do we even know ourselves? In any case, we are too limited by space and time to love very many people the way we wish we could. We live in a broken world, and most of our love is tentative and incomplete in comparison to what we feel and wish we could declare.

Despite all limitations, most of the time when people say they love me, it is a gift of considerable importance to me. Even so, none of them mean exactly the same thing by it. Unless I am too busy to pay attention, I can feel endless varieties and nuances in the content. That is somewhere between staggering and surprising. There is no single definition for love. The spectrum of love is endlessly varied. It is highly individual and personal, and in a world where few things are individual or personal, that of itself is very special.

Some people like to jump to John 15:13: “*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*” But that is John’s summation of the meaning of the crucifixion seventy years after it happened. If that is our definition of love, we are limited to one short-lived, grandstand play for one other person in a lifetime. There are a few people I *would* be willing to die for. Circumstances might cause me to die for other people, even strangers, but that is half accident. If Christianity is a WAY OF LIFE, a PATH WE WALK, then love has to be more than one single incident in one desperate circumstance.

Jesus does love me and has loved me – and not *just* because the Bible tells me so. In real life and in more situations than I have time to describe, Jesus has loved me in ways beyond anything I can fathom. And some of those times were at the lowest and bleakest moments of my life. But I have noticed that Jesus’ love is never as soft as the culture around me thinks love is supposed to be. His love never soothes me into being content with who I already am or what I already think would make me happy. His love is comforting and reassuring beyond anything else in this world, but it also calls us forth more patiently and persistently than anything else in this world.

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One last shift: What Jesus always remembers that I keep trying to forget is that we are not the source of anything. We are creatures, not the Creator. No one gives what they have not received. That is why we are humble, always knowing our need for God. Forgetting our need for God is pride, and pride stops the flow of all that is good or authentic within us.

Jesus' love comes from God. The love of God flows through Him to the people He tries to teach and heal and invite into the Kingdom. It is very clear, if we pay attention, that Jesus wants the people He deals with to love *God* back, not Himself. He wants them more connected and more deeply connected *to God* than ever before. That never turns us into smart alecks – the superior owners of the miracles or the forgiveness or the love or the acceptance that we have received.

We are and always shall be a fellowship of sinners. We keep repenting and finding new dimensions of forgiveness: the restoration of our relationship with God – the realignment of our very being with the presence of God and God's Kingdom. Our love is never our own. Our purposes are never something we design or make up. We discover that God's love is trying to guide and use us. God's purposes are trying to refocus and change *our* purposes to match God's will. Only, it is not the put-down so frequently advertised. We find ourselves saying, "Oh, thank you! That was what I really meant – that is what I was trying to say all along."

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"He who is forgiven little, loves little." If the realignment between us and God is not happening yet, then neither is the love authentic or real.