

"Easter Forgiveness"

Pastor Rich Knight

Easter Sunday!

April 24, 2011

Matthew 28:1-10

I want us to think for a few moments this morning about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the issue of Forgiveness. I chose the topic of forgiveness because it's one of the most essential habits of the heart for each of us to practice. Relationships cannot thrive or even survive without forgiveness. Our souls can't thrive without forgiveness.

Don Henley of the Eagles has a song, *"The Heart of the Matter,"* where he says, *"How can love survive in such a graceless age? When it gets down to the heart of the matter, I think it's about, I think it's about forgiveness,"* says Henley. And he's right. It also seems to me that when it comes down to the heart of the matter, Easter is about forgiveness, too. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a forgiving act.

Now we usually associate Good Friday as the day of forgiveness. The New Testament teaches that, *"Christ died for our sins, once and for all, in order to bring us to God"* (1 Peter 3:18). In the Old Testament the Prophet Isaiah wrote that the Messiah would be *"pierced for our transgressions."* I have often viewed the Cross event like a giant sponge, where Christ soaks up all the guilt and shame and sin of the world, and anything else that separates us from God. Christ absorbed it all, so that none of those things would ever come between us and God again. That is the mystery & miracle of Good Friday.

But Easter itself is also an incredibly forgiving act. Think about it this way. *"For God so loved the world that God gave us his only begotten Son."* God the Creator, so loved the world, that God sent his unique Son,

Jesus Christ to this world with a message of love. And what did the world do with gift? "*Crucify Him, Crucify Him!*" The powers of this world rejected him, mocked him and killed him. Now what would you do in those circumstances? If the people you were trying to help caused you that much pain? I think we'd all pack our bags & get out of town! Instead, God raised Jesus on the third day, to walk once again upon this earth. God did not give up on humanity, in spite of what humanity had done to God.

On the Cross Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" Easter proves that God answered that prayer in the affirmative, "*Yes, I forgive them.*" God raised Jesus Christ from the dead to show us that God has not given up on us, and God never will!

Some of you may be familiar with a missionary couple named Jim and Elisabeth Elliot. Their story is quite famous in certain circles. Elisabeth is still living and resides in Cape Ann. The Elliots were a missionary family who felt called to help the people of Ecuador. They wanted to provide them with medical care, education for their children, and they wanted to tell them about God. In 1956 Jim Elliot and four other men set out to make friends with a tribe of people known as the Aucas -- eastern region of Ecuador. The Elliots were living in a small village and there had been strong signs that the native people nearby, the Aucas, were open to friendship and assistance. The details of what happened next are not known. But at some point a group of Auca men killed all five of the missionaries. Their widows were devastated. Funerals services were held. A time of grieving and soul-searching followed. But two years later, Elisabeth Elliot went back to Ecuador. She lived in the same village, where she was much loved for her work with the children. She eventually befriended a number of the native people nearby, and one day she was invited to live with the Auca people -- the very people that had killed her husband. They asked her how she could be so forgiving. And she told them about someone named Jesus of Nazareth, who had forgiven her.

That journey of going back and continuing to love is at the heart of Easter.

Remember what Jesus told the Thief on the Cross? He said, *"Today you'll be with me in paradise."* Jesus experienced paradise, following his death. He had certainly earned it, and who could blame for never wanting to leave it again! But on Easter Sunday, he came back . . . back to the people he was sent to save. What an act of forgiveness! What a demonstration of persistent and stubborn love. God never gives up on us. Easter is new life for Christ and new life for us!

One of my all-time favorite books is about forgiveness. It's called, **The Art of Forgiving** by **Lewis Smedes**. It's a practical, step by step book on how to forgive others. Smedes says that forgiveness comes in all shapes and sizes. No two situations are exactly the same. But all acts of forgiving share certain basic fundamental principles. He identifies three of these early on in the book. And they're so helpful, and so Easter-like, so Christ-like that I want to share them with you.

I. Lewis Smedes says the first step in forgiving someone is to Rediscover the Humanity of the Person who Hurt us. When someone hurts us we often form a distorted image of them in our minds. They become a villain to us - all evil and vicious. "He's nothing but a _____." "Oh, she's just a _____." But when we start on the path of forgiveness we begin to see the other as a real human being, flawed no doubt, but sharing a common humanity with us -- part sinner, part saint. This doesn't mean that we view the person as suddenly a buddy, or incapable of wronging us again. It just means that we begin to see them as a human being created to be a child of God. We see the person as someone who shares the human condition with us.

This is what God was doing in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God was rediscovering humanity first hand. The New Testament teaches that Christ was the embodiment of the invisible God, come to experience life upon this

earth, so that we might know that no part of the human experience is foreign to God, not even death. God is painfully aware and graciously aware of our flawed humanity. So the first step in forgiving someone is rediscovering their humanity.

II. The next step in forgiving, says Smedes, is surrendering the right to get even. When we have been wronged -- wounded, cheated, abused, demeaned-- a sense of justice within us makes us want to get back at the person -- to cause them as much pain as they've caused us.

The ancient Greek poet Homer wrote about revenge. He said revenge tastes so sweet. We swirl it around on our tongues, and let it drop like honey down our chins. When we take this second step in forgiveness we take a good look at this desire for revenge and then let it spill to the ground like a handful of water.

As a footnote let me say that forgiveness does not mean that you necessarily give up on obtaining justice. For example, If you take your car somewhere to get fixed and they rip you off -- You can forgive the owner and still try to get your money back. And when you've forgiven them, you're not obligated to take your car their anymore. Forgiveness doesn't always mean that you re-establish the relationship. That's a huge subject, of course. Fortunately for us, God forgave us and did re-established the relationship.

In fact, I love how Jesus had no thoughts of revenge following the resurrection. Pontious Pilate, King Herod and the Chief Priests are never mentioned again. If that were me, if I were Jesus, on the Day of Resurrection, I would have marched straight to Pilate's headquarters. - walked up to his receptionist:

"Yes, I'm here to see Pontious Pilate."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No. He's not expecting me. Just tell him 'It's Jesus!'"

Instead, Jesus goes to be with his followers, to continue his ministry with them and through them. Forgiveness frees us from being weighed down by the past. Forgiveness is future oriented. That's why it's so freeing. We free ourselves when we forgive others.

Smedes says, *"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."* Jesus couldn't be imprisoned by a tomb or by bitterness, unforgiveness or anything else.

- Forgiveness sees a common humanity with others.
- It gives up the right to personally get even, to exact revenge upon them.

III. And finally, Forgiveness involves a change of attitude where we start to wish for good things for the one who has hurt us. Once we see the other as a real flesh & blood human being, and we give up our right to enjoy getting even with them, we begin to feel slightly different about the person. When we're bitter we often hope for bad things to happen to that "bad people" who've hurt us. But when we start to forgive someone, we find ourselves beginning to hope that good things come their way. These feelings come slowly, hesitantly & often reluctantly at first. You hear something good has happened to the one who wronged you and you feel surprisingly pleased at their good fortune. "I'm surprised I feel that way, but I do." When that happens, we know we're on the path of forgiveness.

These feelings usually come slowly for us. There were immediate with Jesus. He greets two of his followers right away that morning, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," right outside the tomb. He meets the rest of the disciples that first night in Galilee. He said, *"Be not afraid. Peace be with you."* He meets others on the Road to Emmaus and shares a meal with them as well. The next morning he meets more of his followers on a beach where he cooked them breakfast – a pretty good sign that they were forgiven. He was restoring fellowship

with them. He even spends extra time with Peter, who had denied him 3 times. Jesus extended special grace to Peter.

So, Easter gives us a beautiful picture of our Savior and our God. God just keeps on loving and loving and loving. Thank God!

Let me close by sharing a few of my favorite quotes on forgiveness.

Archibald Hart wrote: *"Forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me."* Jesus clearly did that on Easter Sunday & beyond.

William Ward wrote this: *"We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like mortals when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive."*

And finally, UCC pastor and author, Martin Copenhaver said this: *"Large and frequent doses of forgiveness are necessary in any enduring relationship, and certainly our relationship with God is no exception."*

When it comes down to the heart of the matter, Easter is a large dose of forgiveness. Receive it for yourself today. And then share the medicine with others.

Think about it.

Let's pray about it.

Our Savior and our God, you are an incredible forgiver! Thank you for never giving up on us. Thank you for your grace and your persevering love. Help us to receive the new life you offer us today. We do so in love and gratitude, and in the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior. Amen.