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Acts 3:12-19

Living Together: Forgiveness

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Acts 3:12-19 Common English Bible

Seeing this, Peter addressed the people: “You Israelites, why are you amazed at this? Why are you staring at us as if we made him walk by our own power or piety? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of our ancestors—has glorified his servant Jesus. This is the one you handed over and denied in Pilate’s presence, even though he had already decided to release him. You rejected the holy and righteous one, and asked that a murderer be released to you instead. You killed the author of life, the very one whom God raised from the dead. We are witnesses of this. His name itself has made this man strong. That is, because of faith in Jesus’ name, God has strengthened this man whom you see and know. The faith that comes through Jesus gave him complete health right before your eyes.

“Brothers and sisters, I know you acted in ignorance. So did your rulers. But this is how God fulfilled what he foretold through all the prophets: that his Christ would suffer. Change your hearts and lives! Turn back to God so that your sins may be wiped away.

During this season of Easter, we have been talking about how we live together. Are there ways we can open ourselves up to live together better? The early church community in Acts models for us how people’s lives were transformed because of the news of Easter. Last week we talked about how everyone was of one in heart and mind about their generosity and service for others. The early church wanted no one to be hungry, no one to be homeless, no one to be in need. So, everyone shared and as we try to live together better, we are encouraged to have greater generosity with our own personal resources. Through our generosity we help all people thrive and we say that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.

The last thing Jesus says before he ascends to heaven is “You will be my witnesses” to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Today I want us to think about how forgiveness makes a difference in our witness. Forgiveness is hard. There were two brothers who went to their pastor to settle a longstanding feud. The pastor got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As the brothers were about to leave, the pastor asked each one to make a wish for the other. The first brother turned to the other and said, “I wish you what you wish me.” The second brother threw up his hands and said, “See, pastor, he’s starting up again!” Forgiveness is hard!

In our scripture Peter and John are on their way to pray at the Temple. A man who can’t walk asks them for money but Peter and John don’t have any since their possessions are now the shared property of the community. They respond to the man’s request for money by healing him in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The now healed man leaps into the Temple in praise of God. Folks notice the healed man and they rush to Peter and John to see how they did this. Peter had preached to a large crowd a few days before after the miracle of Pentecost. So, Peter starts preaching again.

At Pentecost and in the sermon we hear in the scripture for today, Peter works hard to convince everyone listening that they made a mistake by crucifying Jesus. Peter’s tone is harsh, and we have to remember that Peter is speaking as a Jew to fellow Jews about Jesus, who was a Jew. Peter accuses his Jewish audience of handing over and rejecting Jesus, which makes me uncomfortable given the long history of prejudice Christians have shown Jews. And Peter is the one who denied and deserted Jesus! How can the guy who deserted Jesus now accuse others of handing him over? We have to remember that the Jews didn’t have authority to execute anyone. The Romans killed Jesus because they regarded him as a threat to Roman authority and power. My hope is that when we hear Peter’s words, we will think about how forgiveness makes a difference in our witness.

READ SCRIPTURE.

We might trick ourselves into believing that every thought we have is pure, every act is just, every choice we make is correct. But if we want to grow in hope and walk in the light of Christ, we must admit our mistakes, so we may open ourselves to the healing mercy of God’s love. We are Easter people and I hope and pray that we know in our bones that we are God’s children, we are loved, we are forgiven. Our lives have been transformed by the abundant mercy given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. However, we resist resurrection by preferring to hold on to familiar guilt. We refuse to forgive others and we refuse to forgive ourselves. We refuse to change our hearts and lives.

Do you know the story of Corrie ten Boom? Her most famous book is *The Hiding Place,* where she tells the story of being a part of the resistance movement in Amsterdam hiding Jews from the Germans during World War II. Her family was arrested and sent to concentration camps. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were in a concentration camp together, but sadly Betsie died. In 1947 Corrie was speaking in a church in Munich about how God forgives. She said when we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. She said in 1947 solemn faces stared back at her, not quite daring to believe. After she finished her talk, people stood up in silence and left. That’s when she saw him. He was in a brown hat and an overcoat, but in her mind he was instantly back in his blue uniform. This man had been a guard at the concentration camp where she was sent with her sister.

Now he was in front of her, with his hand outstretched. “What a fine message, Fräulein,” he said. “How good it is to know that all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!” Corrie ten Boom was face to face with one of her captors. The man kept talking, “You mentioned Ravensbruck concentration camp in your talk, I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein, will you forgive me?” Corrie ten Boom said that she stood there thinking about how her sins had again and again to be forgiven, but she could not forgive this man. Her sister had died in that camp. Since World War II had ended, Corrie had created a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. In her experience, the people who were able to forgive their former enemies were able to rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars were. Those who held on, seemed to be stuck.

Corrie said that forgiveness is not an emotion, but an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. She prayed to God for help. She could lift her hand, but God would have to supply the feeling. Woodenly, mechanically, she thrust her hand into his and as she did a healing warmth started in her shoulder, raced down her arm, and seemed to flood her entire body. She cried out, “I forgive you, brother, with all my heart!” She said in that moment as they held hands, the former guard and the former prisoner, she intensely experienced God’s love.

Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness. Corrie ten Boom said to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you. Her sister Betsie’s last words to her sister before she died were, “there is no pit so deep, that God’s love is not deeper still.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

After that encounter with the guard, for two weeks Corrie ten Boom couldn’t sleep. She would wake up and rehash what had happened. She thought all was forgiven, but she wasn’t letting go! She met with her pastor and he looked out the window towards the church tower. He said, “Up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.” Corrie ten Boom said there were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in her conversations, but her willingness in the matter had left. The rehashing of the incident came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Peter is urging people to repent, to turn from the way that they been living and to live in a new way. Change your hearts and lives! Turn back to God so that your sins may be wiped away. To repent means to acknowledge our guilt in the ways that we, and our systems, and our leaders have not fulfilled God’s desires for all of humanity to flourish. Peter wants his listeners to own up to its rebellion and injustice and to see God bringing life out of death.

Sin breaks life apart and forgiveness gives us life again. Forgiveness reunites us with God and one another. There was a couple who had been married for 15 years who began having more than usual disagreements. They wanted to make their marriage work and agreed on an idea. For one month they planned to drop a slip in a fault box. The fault box would provide a place to let the other know about daily irritations. One of them was diligent in their efforts: leaving the jelly top off the jar, wet towels on the shower floor, dirty socks not in hamper, on and on until the end of the month. At the end of the month they exchanged fault boxes. They opened their boxes and read what they had done wrong. But, in one of the fault boxes all the messages were the same. They all said, “I love you!”

Forgiveness changes us from the inside out. May God increase our willingness to forgive others and ourselves. May we remember Peter’s words: Change your hearts and lives! May we turn back to God so that our sins may be wiped away. Amen.

1. https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/forgiveness.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)