

Today is World Communion Sunday, a gift of the Presbyterian Church to the larger Christian world. We celebrate on the first Sunday in October to remember that our bonds of faith are stronger than our bonds of race, nationality, class, or any other division we can imagine. We are for better and for worse all in this together. That is what healthy spirituality teaches us, and we need to be taught over and over again. We so easily fall into the delusion that we are separate, that no one understands my pain, that we live in a zero-sum game, where for me to win, you must lose. This is the great sickness that we are under. Another name for this sickness is sin. Sin is what separates us from each other, and communion is the medicine Jesus gave us to cure us of this sickness.

And boy do we need a cure, because there are so many things that threaten to tear us apart. Jesus says we should be prepared, because things that cause people to trip and fall into sin will happen. Sin happens. Though we don't celebrate it, we need not be surprised by it either. Sometimes you hear people say things like, "I expect better behavior from people in the church." While I'd like the church to be a community of virtue, I'm not shocked when sinners sin, and I don't think God is either. Years ago, I had a friend who had children, long before Asher was born. He said as a parent, his goal was not to raise children who don't sin, because that's not possible. His goal instead was to raise children who knew how to repent, who knew what to do with their sin. I think that's right, and I think that's what Jesus is teaching us in this passage.

Of course, you don't want to be the person causes harm to others. That's what the bit about the millstone and the sea means. Though the language is extreme, Jesus' point is that you don't want to be a person who harms children. You don't want that on your conscience, so watch yourself and others. When it comes to the wellbeing of children, we all have a duty to protect. We have a child-protection policy here at Covenant that helps ensure the horrifying stories we've seen take place at other churches will not take place here. But policies are only as good as the people who know them and abide by them. For all of you here today, if you ever have a concern about the safety of a child or an adult here at Covenant, please say something. You are your brother and sister's keeper, and it's up to all of us to ensure this church is a safe place for people to learn, grow, and worship.

What do we do when sinners sin? How are we to respond? Jesus is as clear as he can possibly be:

If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them. Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person.

The cure for sin is repentance and forgiveness, and forgiveness is hard, isn't it? That's why the disciples say, "Increase our faith!" It wasn't any easier for them than it is for us. Besides being hard, forgiveness feels foolish, even dangerous. What does it teach a person who wrongs us if we keep forgiving them over and over again? Doesn't that enable the abuser to keep on abusing? It's true that verses like these are used by abusive people to silence their victims. Forgiveness language has also been used by groups of people as a way to not address historical and systemic evils. All of this is a misuse of forgiveness.

Understood rightly, forgiveness does not cover up wrongs or excuse abuse. In fact, it does the exact opposite. We often forget that forgiveness always includes an accusation. To

forgive another person is to accuse them of wrongdoing. It's precisely not covering up evil and pretending like it didn't happen. When you forgive another person, the first thing you say is that you were wrong. You should not have treated me that way. You should have known better! **The first step of forgiveness is naming and acknowledging the wrongdoing.** When it comes to abusive relationships whether on the individual level or on the societal level, we often never get to this first step. Until the wrongdoing is named and acknowledged by the victim, there can be no forgiveness.

The first step of forgiveness is the accusation, and that's hard enough. It takes courage to name a wrong, especially when it involves someone you care about or has power over you. **The second step is even harder, and that's the letting go.** The word "forgive" in Greek means to release or let go. It's to say to the one who's harmed you, I am letting go of my claims for retribution against you and giving you back to God. I do not excuse what you did or say it didn't matter. It did matter. You were wrong, but I am renouncing my need for vengeance against you. I should note that personal forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean there are no legal consequences, but it does mean you let go your personal need for retribution. Man is that difficult. In fact, I wonder if it's downright impossible.

The disciples hear Jesus say to forgive seven times, and they respond increase our faith. Seven is the number of completeness, a symbol of infinity. In other Gospels Jesus makes himself even clearer saying that we are to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven, which is to say there is no limit on how much we forgive. After all, there's no limit on how much God forgives us. Why should it be any different with each other? Now, in this passage, it sounds like Jesus is saying that before we forgive others, they should first repent, but the rest of the New Testament makes it clear that we are to forgive whether or not the other person repents. I don't know about you, but that feels impossible to me. I'm left saying, Lord, increase my faith, because I don't have enough.

Jesus says that's OK. You don't worry about that. If you have even a speck of faith, you could move this tree into the sea. Well, I've not been able to do any Jedi mind tricks yet, and I think that's Jesus' point. This demand of forgiveness is impossible. Left to yourself, you can't do it. You're no more able to forgive than you are able to move a tree with your mind, but the good news is, you're not left to yourself. Even mustering up faith isn't something God expects of you. **Forgiveness, like faith itself, is a gift from God.** It's not something we do. It's something we receive. That's why every week we have a corporate confession of sin and hear words of forgiveness. Some of you don't like that part of our service, and I understand. But know that we do this not to make you feel bad about yourself, nor is it to say that you are personally guilty of everything you confess. It's a communal practice recognizing that despite our best efforts, we still make a mess of things, and need forgiveness, and God is always eager to forgive. Of course, I'm not the one forgiving you. I simply declare the good news that God forgives you. It's a small but important distinction. We do this every week to remind ourselves that no matter how many times we and our fellow humans fall short, God is always ready to forgive.

By God's grace we learn to receive that gift, to trust it's true, and in time, often in spite of ourselves, that gift flows through us to other people. God gives. We receive and it flows through us. It becomes so natural that it's even worthy of special praise. Like the servants in the parable at the end, forgiveness is in the job description. When we consider the great injustices in our world, like the ones spoken of in our Habakkuk reading, or the war in Ukraine, or the still

unaddressed trauma of racialized terror against people of color in our country both past and present, or on the personal level of people who've harmed you that should know better, forgiveness is an impossible demand, except for fact that God forgives forever and infinitely. In doing so, God does not shrug off the sin of this world, but names it and forgives it. And praise God that's what God does.

What Bishop Tutu said about South Africa after apartheid can be said about our country and our personal lives as well: **Without forgiveness, there's no future.** Because God forgives, we can learn to forgive as well. We need not be held captive by the shame of what we've done or what others have done to us, but instead we remember that we are all in this together. Sin separates us and makes us sick, and forgiveness is the cure. That's what this meal reminds us. We call it communion—where the many become one. This meal reminds us of what's true, that we belong to Christ, and therefore we belong to one another. All belonging, all forgiven, all beloved.