

## “Loving Others as We Have Been Loved.”

With the new year just a few days away, it seems a good time to remind ourselves that we are part of a community that was founded by God in Christ on the premise of forgiveness and love. And it's worth remembering that one of Jesus' final acts on earth was to forgive those who partook in his execution.

Therefore, in preparing for these remarks, I looked ahead to the readings for today. I was pleasantly surprised to find these words of exhortation from the reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae (ko-LAH-see):

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12-14).

A couple of important points about forgiveness need to be brought out.

First, and not only in the church but also in the world, *forgiveness must be mutual*. There is no one with hands entirely clean. At some point we have all offended *others*, and we've all been offended *by* others. And so, for forgiveness to work best, it must be mutual.

Second, our ability to forgive others springs in large part from our knowledge that we have first been forgiven and loved by God. That is the proper foundation for being able to relate in loving-kindness and forgiveness for others.

Third, the purpose of such forgiveness is not simply to “clear the air,” or the healing of our emotions. Rather, its purpose is reconciliation, and the strengthening of the community. Because any community that does not have forgiveness as an integral part of its life, will ultimately be a superficial community. And what is required for sustaining community is more than a single

act of forgiveness but, rather, the willingness of those in that community to practice a discipline of ongoing forgiveness.

The importance of forgiveness is made clear in this true story.

Years after her experiences in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, Corrie ten Boom happened to meet one of the most cruel and heartless German guards that she had ever encountered as a prisoner. This man had humiliated and degraded Corrie and her sister. But, one day, he stood before her with hands outstretched and asking, "Will you forgive me?"

She writes:

"I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I knew that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, 'Jesus, help me!'

Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing.

The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart.

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never know the love of God so intensely as I did in the moment!"

Corrie ten Boom learned in that moment, that to forgive is to set a prisoner free, **and** to discover that the prisoner was you.

One of the principal messages of Jesus was that the kingdom of heaven had come into our midst. And one of the defining characteristics of that kingdom was the practice of mutual forgiveness. Forgiveness was so important to Jesus, not so much because it was the right thing to do, but rather because forgiveness was one of the means through which the kingdom of heaven might be realized here on earth. And by being a forgiving people, we are giving testimony that the work of God is being accomplished, in our own time, and in our own lives.

George Herbert once wrote that

“He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself.”

It is a truth that those who cannot, or who will not, forgive, imprison chiefly themselves. But it was Jesus who, quoting the prophet Isaiah (61:1), said this of his work:

“The Spirit of the Almighty Lord is with me because the Lord has anointed me to deliver good news to humble people. He has sent me to heal those who are brokenhearted, to announce that captives will be set free and prisoners will be released.”

A new year is nearly upon us, and it is the practice of many to make resolutions. Perhaps, included in those resolutions to eat better and exercise more, we might also resolve to *love better and forgive more*, and finally be the sort of people that God has enabled us to be.

Amen.