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Sermon Text: II Corinthians 5:16-21

Sermon Title: "Forgiveness Required"

We are continuing in our sermon series called "Building Great Relationships," where, using I Corinthians Chapter 13 as our rubric, we consider the Biblical components to great, lasting relationships. Today we consider the notion of forgiveness based on I Corinthians 13:6: "Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." To help us unpack the meaning of forgiveness and its importance in our relationships, we turn to another letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Listen for God's Word as it comes to us in II Corinthians 5:16-21.

"Out of the mouths of babes oft times come gems": Interviews with Children

What does forgiveness mean?

- Grace 8: "When someone is mean, you can say it's ok."
- Jimmy 6: "It's what happens when you say you are sorry and mean it."

When have you needed forgiveness?

- Malachi 7: "In the summer – because in the summer I do more things. The more things I do, the more chance there is that I might do the wrong thing." – Same is true of relationships.

What does it mean to believe that God forgives us?

- Ben 5: "It's how we know God loves us."
- Trippe: "It means God put Jesus on the cross for us."
- Grace 8: "It means God says he will give you another chance."
- Hannah 7: "God forgave us, therefore, we can forgive others."

Why is it important that we forgive people?

- If you don't forgive your brother or sister, they might bite you. – literally, figuratively?
- If you don't forgive someone, they might not like you.
- Drew 12: God deserves our best. You're not giving God your best if you don't forgive. God gave us a second chance. Everyone deserves a second chance.
- Justin 13: Your relationships might break if there's no forgiveness.

What would you want to tell adults about forgiveness?

- In unison: "Forgive your kids." ☺ - Especially in the summer

God's Forgiveness of Us

- Great gems of truth from our children: "God forgave us; therefore, we can forgive others." "God gives us a second chance; everyone deserves a second chance."
- Paul would agree wholeheartedly with our children. Paul describes the second chance God gives us as that of a new creation:

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ."

- Given a second chance in the most radical and loving way possible
- Even when we were the ones at fault and thus should have taken the initiative to make amends with God, God out of God's great love for us takes the initiative and does for us what we could not do for ourselves: He reconciles Himself to us. B/c of Christ, God no longer counts our sins against us.
- *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference*, Philip Yancey - great story about what it means to believe that God does not count our sins against us.
 - Catholic archbishop of Manila, a woman in his parish – seeing visions, hearing messages
 - Decided to test her authenticity – ask what sin I most recently confessed to God in private
 - "God said that he could not remember."

- **Because of Christ's work on the cross, we have been given a clean slate in the most radical and loving way possible, as if our sins have been wiped clean from God's mind, leaving only the grace of Christ in its place. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ."**

"...and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

- But as often happens, we put a period where God puts a comma.
- God's forgiveness → what it means for us, that we are forgiven
- Verse doesn't stop there
- God did not reconcile us to himself for just our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.
- God took the initiative by reconciling us to God's self. That reconciliation now demands that we carry out that message as God's representatives.
- To believe fully in God's forgiveness means that we do not just live it for ourselves, but we live it for the world.
- **God is the source of reconciliation; we are the instruments God has chosen to bring that reconciliation to fruition.**

Images Paul uses to describe our role as instruments of God's reconciliation

- **Verse 19: God is "entrusting us with the message of reconciliation - steward"**
 - When something is entrusted to another's care, it involves both a privilege and obligation
 - Privilege – Other party trusts the person enough to care for something of great value
 - Obligation – One to whom the item has been entrusted must be a good steward of that which has been placed under his/her care
 - So it is with ministry of reconciliation
 - **God loves us so much that, not only does God reconcile us to Himself, but God also entrusts us with the privilege of continuing his work of reconciliation**
 - **As a result, we are now called to be stewards of that grace, good stewards of the grace we have received, not by hoarding it for ourselves, but extending it to others so that they may experience reconciliation as well.**
 - **God's reconciling us to Himself is a gift, a privilege, and an obligation.**
- **Image of ambassador**
 - The Greek word is *presbeuomen* – the same root from which we get the word "Presbyterian" or "elder."
 - Representative or a spokesperson for a king or ruler or other official.
 - Often one who lives in one country and represents another culture or country, their home.
 - They live by the values and traditions of their homeland, even while living in a foreign land, and, in doing so, bear witness to their home.
 - **As Christ's ambassadors, we represent our heavenly home by living out God's love and forgiveness and grace in this world.**
 - **God has reconciled us to himself. In response, we are called to be stewards of and ambassadors for the grace we have received in Christ**

It's one thing to understand that we should forgive people/seek reconciliation. It's another thing to actually do it! So how are we to be ambassadors of reconciliation? Paul offers us several keys:

1. In order to forgive, we can no longer regard no one from a human point of view.

- Christ from human point of view – misunderstood who Christ was, what his motives were, when he viewed the cross not as victory, but as failure and weakness
- God revealed to Paul victory in reconciling Paul to God → P has new lens through which he sees both God and God's people. **And so do we.**
- Where we once saw people from a human point of view, because of Christ's reconciling work, we are now able to see people from the Spirit's point of view.
- **Human point of view** - viewing people through the lens of judgment, assumptions, and bias. In short, viewing people through the eyes of the created, the creature
- **The Spirit's point of view** - viewing people through the eyes of the Creator, seeing people as a fellow child of God, a person for whom Christ offered His own life. **In short, viewing people through the lens of the very grace God offers us.**
- **Our conversion to Christ involves a converted criteria for evaluating what is valuable and true.**
- Through the lens of the Spirit, we are able to view people, **not only as the creatures they are now, but as the new creations they have yet to be.**

2. Forgiveness does not mean condoning the wrong-doing.

- Wrong-doing is still exactly that: wrong-doing.
- Love does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth.
- So forgiveness means speaking the truth in love, lovingly sharing the truth about the wrong-doing and the truth about how our actions impact our relationships.
- Particularly when the offense comes in the form of abuse, violence, or other evil act, speaking truth may come in the form of setting health boundaries with the person.
- **Forgiveness does not mean condoning the act or pretending it didn't happen. To forgive means to rejoice in the truth – being truthful about our lives, our actions, and our relationships and allowing God's truth to bring the reconciliation needed.**

3. Forgiveness means remembering we are ambassadors of the King, not the King himself.

- Both the King and the ambassador have responsibilities.
- The King is the one who has authority to judge; the ambassador does not.
- Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"
- God is the ruler; we are the ambassador.
- **Vengeance and judgment are entrusted to God; the ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us.**
- As ambassadors, our responsibility is to make room for God's vengeance by taking our own need for revenge out of the equation.
- Anne Lamott, "Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back."

4. Forgiveness means not only not desiring revenge, but desiring good.

- To fully answer the call to be ministers of God’s reconciliation means, not only that we do not wish bad for someone, but that we do wish *good* for them.
- Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan – *Nooma* DVD series
- What ultimate forgiveness entails - **“Forgiveness is to let go. It’s to give up the right for revenge. But ultimately to really forgive somebody I have to actually wish them well. I have to hope that good comes their way. Because if I don’t wish good to come to them, then I’m still wishing bad for them. I’m still wishing for revenge.”**
- Forgiveness means to wish the goodness of the peace and reconciliation we have experienced with God to be the experience of our enemy as well.

5. Finally, forgiveness involves perseverance.

- In case no one has told you yet, forgiveness is hard work.
- As we try to be faithful ministers of God’s grace, we may often hover between hostility and reconciliation.
- Forgiveness is not for the weak. **Ghandi: “Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”**
- Only the strong can forgive. **But not those who are strong in their own power, but those who draw strength from God.**
- Again, God is the source of the reconciliation. So we God’s instruments must draw on the source in order to forgive.
- **We must daily receive God’s grace in order also to give grace.**
- Sometimes that grace comes in the form of praying, “God, forgive them for me” and then allowing God to heal and forgive and bring to completion the reconciliation God began.
- **Perhaps most often in comes in the form of extending God’s grace, not only to others, but also to ourselves.** There have been and will continue to be times when we are the ones who mess up, when we are the ones in need of forgiveness.
- Just as offering forgiveness to others can be a great witness to the Gospel, so can our asking for forgiveness.
- Rather than trying to justify our actions or pretend the offense never happened, we can be a minister of reconciliation when we humbly admit our own wrong-doing to one another, ask for the other’s forgiveness, and let that humility and forgiveness guide us into a deeper and lasting relationship.
- **When we are able to both freely give and freely receive God’s grace, we God’s ambassadors will sees God’s reconciliation come to beautiful fruition – both in others’ lives and in our own.**

Desmond Tutu, bishop of South Africa, knows firsthand how difficult the road to reconciliation can be.

- Country plagued for generations by violence between the white ruling minority and the black majority.
- When Nelson Mandela became President, the question demanding an answer was obvious: **How does a country with such great pain and violence in its past move forward?**
- Two options: vengeful judgment or national amnesia, that is, pretending that the past did not exist.
- **Desmond Tutu insisted there was a third way: forgiveness, for, in his words, “Without forgiveness, there’s no future.”**
- In an effort to start down the road to reconciliation as a country, Tutu and others established the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**.
- The goal was to have those who committed atrocities – on both sides, both blacks and whites – to come forward and to tell the truth.
- Often when those hurt by the atrocities went before the commission, they would beg the commission to tell them who committed the crimes against them. When asked why they wanted to know who was responsible and if they did so because they wanted vengeance or justice, they said no.
- **They said, “We do want to forgive, but we don’t know whom to forgive.”**
- One by one the offenders and the offended party were brought before one another. And one by one, rather than continue the endless cycle of hatred, they forgave one another. And one by one a new cycle began: The cycle of reconciliation. One person at a time
- **In reflecting on this newly found reconciliation, Desmond Tutu writes, “Does forgiveness mean we don’t care about justice? Does forgiveness mean there is no consequence for evil? No! What it means is that we leave justice and vengeance in God’s hands. God alone can judge rightly. Our job, as agents of God’s kingdom on earth, is to break the cycles of hate – to move from a people of exclusion to a people of embrace, forgiving others just as God, in Christ, has forgiven us.”**

Let us pray...