

St. Matthew 18:21-22

Dear Friends in Christ,

Jeanette Lockerbie was an author and the wife of a pastor. She died in 1998. In her book, "The Image of Joy" she tells about overhearing a Christian say about a fellow Christian, "I've buried the hatchet, but I've left the handle sticking up." That's along the same line as saying, "I'll forgive, but I won't forget." That puts a big question mark after "I'll forgive." Well, sometimes it's very hard to forgive and forget when someone sins against us, but in Christ it's exactly what God does for us.

I recall, from some years ago, reading that the first missionaries to Labrador could not find a word for forgiveness in the Eskimo language. And so, they coined a word. The word they chose translated into "Not being able to think about it anymore."

And then I recalled a rather interesting but unusual definition of forgiveness: "It's the odor that flowers breathe when they are trampled upon." Let's take a look at . . .

### **IT'S NOT EASY TO DO UNLESS...**

#### **I. We Understand What We Are.**

Harold Senkbeil wrote:

We keep thinking we're Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde: one person with multiple personalities that take over at different times. The ugly truth is that we're good and evil, saint and sinner, all at the same time. We know from bitter experience just what Paul was talking about: *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* (Rom. 7:18, NIV) (Harold L. Senkbeil, "Dying to Live," CPH, 1994, p. 176)

That's me. That's talking about me! When I compare this person before Christ entered my life with now...well...the fact is, I don't want to make comparisons. I see the Jekyll/Hyde conflict. I cry with Paul, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." (Rom. 7:18) I could never consider myself better than anyone.

The crux of the issue is what is called "original sin." *The Augsburg Confession* says, "all men are full of evil lusts and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable to have true fear of God or true faith in God." (Tappert, "The Book of Concord," p. 100.2) That's original sin. We must confess what David confessed: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Ps. 51:5) The Scriptures very clearly and very simply state, "we...were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Eph. 2:3b) The Psalmist declares, "I said in my alarm, 'All mankind are liars.'" (Ps. 116:11) Please hear this from *The Apology Of The Augsburg Confession*:

Recognition of original sin is a necessity, nor can we know the magnitude of the grace of Christ unless we acknowledge our faults. All the righteousness of man is mere hypocrisy before God ("So and so is a good person! Surely, God has to love the person!") unless we acknowledge that of itself the heart is lacking in love, fear, and trust in God. Thus the prophet says, "After I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh." (Jer. 31:19) (Tappert, "The Book of Concord, p. 104.33)

Well, do I need to elaborate? Look at what has unfolded in this country and the world in just the past 20 years. Pardon the monotony, but we've listened to the cry of "The New Normal", but just what is normal? There are roughly 5 generations walking this planet right now; 5 generations in which the oldest can say, "I've lived through five New Normals!" We do love to invent and excuse ourselves with our cute, little cliches, don't we?

You see, any discussion about forgiveness cannot take place unless we each understand what we were and what we are before a Holy God!

## II. We Understand the Love of God.

And any discussion about forgiveness cannot take place unless we understand the love of God! I have another statement from our Lutheran Confessions that's so very important, especially when we are overwhelmed with guilt and regrets:

When we teach that through the Holy Spirit's work we are regenerated and justified, we do not mean that after regeneration no unrighteousness in essence and life adheres to those who have been justified and regenerated (in and of ourselves, we are not sinless), but we hold that Christ with his perfect obedience (the fact that He did everything necessary to earn our forgiveness) covers all our sins which throughout this life still inhere in our nature. (Tappert, p. 543:22)

I find the words that ease the aching heart here are these: "Christ with his perfect obedience covers all our sins which throughout this life still inhere (is permanent) in our nature." The battle goes on, but the love of God through Christ's obedience goes on and covers all sin. This isn't excusing sin, or opening a door for living in unrepentant sin. It addresses the on-going reality of sin and comforts the guilt ridden soul! Please listen to Luther on this:

"Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin.  
"...when we pass from this life, he will instantly perfect our holiness..."  
(Tappert, p. 418.54,59)

We must understand that the love of God in Christ gives us the peace that surpasses all understanding. Though we are still sinful, and careful self-examination reveals a side of ourselves that can bring us to tears, in Christ God looks at each of us and says: **FORGIVEN!**

## III. As Our Text Says.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matt. 28:21-22)

Evidently, Peter threw out a number that appeared to him to be magnanimous: "How many times should I forgive the same person who keeps sinning against me? Up to 7 times?" Jesus' answer implies that there is no limit.

In the fourth petition of the Lord's prayer we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Of this petition, Luther wrote:

Inasmuch as we sin against God every day and yet he forgives it all through grace, we must always forgive our neighbor who does us harm, violence, and injustice, bears malice toward us, etc. If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you." (Tappert, p. 433.94)

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. 6:14-15) And in *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, Jesus closes by saying, “So will my heavenly Father do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matt. 18:35) Simple. Clear.

Please recall that at the beginning of the sermon I gave you this unusual definition of forgiveness: “It’s the odor that flowers breathe when they are trampled upon.” You know, that’s not a bad definition of the wonderful fragrance of Christ’s forgiveness as He was held there, on the Cross, trampled by hands and feet of sinful humans - “pierced for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities.” That’s why I chose the Lenten hymn, “Upon the Cross Extended”, for the sermon hymn; focusing on verse 3: “Who is it, Lord, that bruised you?/ Who has so sore abused you/ And caused You all Your woe?/ We all must make confession/ Of sin and dire transgression/ While You no ways of evil know.”

And then those words from His dying lips. You know them well: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” (Lk. 23:34) Could we say it any other way for others? For one another?

I don’t believe so, either.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

September 13, 2020

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## “It’s Not Easy to Do Unless...”

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- II. We Understand the Love of God.
- III. As Our Text Says.

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 N. Oakland Avenue  
Decatur Illinois 62526