

LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli
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FORGIVENESS 102
Isaiah 55:1-5

I need to have you do something for me before we begin the sermon today. If you have been a member of this church for at least *five years*, stand up. Remain standing if you've been a member for *ten years* or more. *Twenty years*. *Thirty years*. *Forty years* or more? Look around at the people who have been a part of this church family for forty years or more. Remember who they are. I'm going to refer to them later in the sermon.



Two weeks ago I preached the sermon "Forgiveness 101." My emphasis was on the church, our church, and challenged us to be a congregation that welcomes all ... not to be in the business of *morality*, but in the business of *FORGIVENESS* ... the business of *LOVING* people.

But I must tell you, that as a minister, I am continually reminded of the many burdens people bear in this life ... the *emotional* scars, the *painful* memories, the *gut-wrenching* guilt and *feelings* of regret. Sometimes the stories I hear are *staggering*.

I've come to the conclusion that there are really only three kinds of people in this world:

- those who need to *be forgiven*,
- those who need to *be forgiving of someone else*,
- and the largest group is those who need to *be both forgiven and forgiving*.



A 1980 UN convention banned the use against civilian targets of napalm, a terrifying mixture of jet fuel and polystyrene that sticks to skin as it burns. It was employed notoriously against both civilian and military targets in the Vietnam War. The problem, after the ban went into effect, was how to dispose of thousands of tons of the stuff somewhere that will not be a hazard both physically and environmentally. The Pentagon reported that the destruction of our last batch of napalm occurred on April 4, 2001.

A related story I read just a couple of years ago, is a great illustration of the power of forgiveness. It's a deeply moving story about a woman named Kim, and a man named John Plummer.

John Plummer was the helicopter pilot, back in 1972, who was ordering napalm attacks on a Vietnamese village. That kind of bombing seemed to him a rather *impersonal, mechanistic* kind of thing, that is, until he saw that *Pulitzer Prize-Winning photograph* of a *little girl*, nine years old, her *clothes burned off by napalm*, running down the street *naked, crying and screaming*. I know many of you have seen that same picture, I have. *That image became imbedded in John Plummer's soul*. In his sleep he had *nightmares* of that scene, and that little girl screaming in agony. *It ruined his life for a long time*.

When he got out of the service, he was an alcoholic. He went through several divorces, and he continued to have this nightmare. His life was in total turmoil.

THEN, he became a Christian. He began to realize that what he needed to do was to find that little girl, if she were even still alive, and ask for her forgiveness. He thought about it over and over again. He wasn't sure how it could happen, *but he knew that's what he HAD to do*.

God provided a way. On November 11, 2004, John Plummer, along with some veteran friends and his wife, was far back in the crowd as this woman, Kim, who was in the photograph, took the stage in Washington D.C. Kim finished her speech, and a friend grabbed Plummer's arm and dragged him forward. His friend handed a note to one of Kim's special escorts from the *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Fund*. He read the note and then whispered to Kim that John Plummer was behind her. She was in a hurry to get to the hotel, but Kim said, "I couldn't move anymore. I stopped and turned. And he looked at me."

No news photographer took this picture. As the two of them stood in the awesome presence of the *Vietnam War Memorial*, the soldier, now 57, and the child, now 41, embraced.

"She just opened her arms to me. I fell into her arms, sobbing," John Plummer said. "All I could say is, 'I'm so sorry, I'm just so sorry.'"

"It's all right," she told him. "I forgive. I forgive."

Plummer and Kim talked for two hours and prayed together that day. They are now friends and they speak regularly. "Since meeting Kim, I don't hear anything in that dream anymore," Plummer said. "I don't hear the screams anymore."

Friends ... Do you see that *FORGIVENESS* must come before *HEALING*.

That's why Jesus, frequently in the gospels, declares to those who come to him wanting some kind of healing, he declares to them that their sins are forgiven before they ever receive the healing.

★ Therefore, it appears to me that Forgiveness *IS* the *FOUNDATION* of *HEALING*, while the *LACK* of *FORGIVENESS* means continued *SUFFERING* and *BROKENNESS*.



YOU CAN SEE THE NEED EVERYWHERE AROUND YOU.

It's in the *PERSON* whose soul is troubled by some transgression of long ago. She is *wracked* by regret and *governed* by guilt. She's *never* completely happy, even when everything seems right in her life, because the memory of the past is always there, hanging over her like a dark cloud blotting out the sun. *It is truly tragic*. Such a person will impose upon herself a lifetime of suffering and won't *ever* be healed *unless she can ACCEPT God's forgiveness of her sins*.

You can see the need for forgiveness in *HOMES* and *FAMILIES*, where people of the same flesh and blood can hardly stand to be with one another. Every offhand remark, every look of the eye, every tone of voice dredges up grievances which have been accumulating for many years. These families imprison each other in a living hell and will *never escape* unless, as a family, they can find a way to *FORGIVE* and *FORGET*.

You can see it in a *CHURCH*, when disputes arise and factions form, when things are done and said by one side or another, and the memory of it lingers on. The people in that kind of a church share the same worship space on Sunday morning, but don't share a fellowship any more. Slowly, the church is robbed of vitality and its spirit is strangled. There is sickness unto *death* until these sisters and brothers in Christ can *FORGIVE* and *BE FORGIVEN*.

And even at a larger level in the *WORLD*: forgiveness must sow the seeds of healing and peace. Why else does the violence continue for generation after generation in places like *Northern Ireland*? In the *Middle East*, why do *Arab*, *Palestinian* and *Jew*

go on hating and fighting each other from age to age ... from the oldest citizen to the youngest child? *Why is that?*

Neither side can FORGIVE! Neither side can LET GO OF THE PAST! In fact, both sides *feed* on the past and teach their children to *eat* that *bitter food*. They glorify in the *memory of every abuse* and *commemorate the anniversary of every injustice* ... so the PAST becomes the PROLOGUE to the FUTURE.

On and on it goes, and when it will stop, GOD only knows.



THERE IS A BETTER WAY.

There is a way to break through this cycle of RESENTMENT and REGRET, in our lives and in the world. It is the way of FORGIVENESS, as *taught* and *demonstrated* by Jesus Christ. Christ, as the God-presence in our world, showed us the importance of *forgiveness* and *love* in *every* aspect of his life. And when he was there on the cross, as he was dying, that *forgiveness* and *love* never deserted him ... “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Can you capture the *sense* and *depth* of Jesus’ LOVE in those words? Christ’s ability to FORGIVE?

The way to break through all the *crud* and *crap* of our lives ... the RESENTMENT and REGRET ... is the way of FORGIVENESS. *The prophet announced it long ago: “Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!”*

It’s a welcome cry to weary souls: *the forgiveness you need is here!* More than that, it’s FREE! It’s FREE, because that’s the only way it could be! That’s what God’s GRACE is all about. That’s what God’s UNCONDITIONAL LOVE is all about. That’s what Christ DEMONSTRATED on the cross for each of us. If you have wronged another ... can you BUY their forgiveness? NO. When someone has hurt you deeply ... can they PURCHASE your forgiveness? **NO. It can only be FREELY given ... FREELY received.**

Every one who *thirsts*, come to the table, and drink of the cup of blessing. This is what Isaiah declares! You who have *no money* ... you who have *no moral capital* with which to *buy* your pardon ... *come and eat the bread of life. Come and taste God’s FORGIVENESS, given FREELY to every humble spirit and contrite heart.*

I can’t emphasize this strongly enough. I know people whose *broken hearts* could be healed in an *instant* if they would only *accept* the *forgiveness* God has already given to them. And I know people whose *bitter spirits* could be healed *right now* if they would only be *forgiving*, even *as they have been forgiven*.



You know, every so often you hear about someone who stands on a street corner and tries to pass out money. For free, no catch, no strings attached, “Here, take some money.”

The incredible thing is that usually, people turn it down. *They turn down free money!* They figure there has *got* to be a catch.

And that’s what’s so amazing about the *forgiveness* God is offering to us. It is there *for the taking* ... God gives it *freely*. *Yet so many of us turn it down and walk away.*

FORGIVENESS is a way for us to right a relationship in our life that has gone awry. Christ has shown us the *power of forgiveness* and *how to do it*. It’s a GIFT we can *use* and *offer* to one who has hurt us. But some people turn away from the gift because it is *so hard to do*.



Jimmy Carter, in one of his Sunday school classes in Plains, Georgia once said this about forgiveness:

“Forgiving is one of the most difficult things for a human being to do, but I think it means looking at some slight you feel, putting yourself in the position of the other person, and wiping away any sort of resentment and antagonism you feel toward them. Then let that other person know that everything is perfectly friendly and normal between you.”

Some people turn away from the *FORGIVENESS* they need that God offers because they feel they don’t *deserve* it. “No,” they say, “I am *unworthy*. My soul is *unclean*. Leave me here in my *misery*; the things I’ve done are *so terrible* that no one can help me now.”

Well, these are *precisely* the people Jesus came to save: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God*” (Matthew 5:3). *These are the very people Jesus loves the MOST ... the ones who feel they are the MOST UNLOVED.*

“Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!”

Then there are people who will agree that *THEY* are *worthy* of God’s *FORGIVENESS* ... it’s the *OTHER* person *OVER THERE* who isn’t worthy! “*He’s never been much of a Christian,*” they say. Or, “*She hasn’t really repented and changed her ways so how can she be forgiven?*”

★ Fortunately, God’s *mercy* is *BROADER* than our hearts can feel; God’s *forgiveness* runs *DEEPER* than our minds can imagine.

★ Fortunately, God pays no attention to the ways *WE* try to limit God’s love.

★ *God forgives US ... so that we might find it easier to forgive ONE ANOTHER.*

“Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!”



Even if I had never met any of you before, I know *enough* about the human condition to know that *somewhere* in this sanctuary today ...

- *There are people who need to leave their sorrow with God and FEEL FORGIVEN.*
- *There are people who need to give up their hurt and FEEL FORGIVING.*

God knows each of us, even in secret, and God knows we can’t possibly *afford* to *purchase* the *FORGIVENESS* we need to *RECEIVE* and the *FORGIVENESS* we need to *EXTEND*.

God knows we are coming to Him “*just as we are, without one plea,*” to *BUY* God’s *FORGIVENESS* for *FREE*.



Because my brother died of AIDS, I’ve had the opportunity over the last 15 years to talk with and minister to people who have contracted that hideous disease. In Akron I was asked to visit a man who was dying of AIDS. His mother, Gerdie Barr, was a member of my congregation. Through a lifetime of drug addiction and the use of dirty needles, Jeff was now paying the ultimate price.

I went into his bedroom at Gerdie’s house, he had been divorced for many years and Gerdie had opened her home to her son so that he might die with dignity, I went in to talk to Jeff about God’s *love* and *forgiveness*. And he responded to me by saying,

“There’s no forgiveness for me. I’ve ruined my life. I’m lost. I deserve to go to Hell and be punished, to be condemned.”

I saw a picture on his dresser of a young girl and asked him who it was. He said, “That’s a photograph of my daughter. My ex-wife won’t let me see her ... I haven’t seen her in five years. *She’s been the only beautiful thing in my life.*”

I wasn’t sure what to say, but then the words came, “If your daughter was in trouble, if she came to you and asked for forgiveness, would you *forgive* her, would you *help* her?”

Jeff replied, *“Of course I would.”*

I looked at Jeff and said, “God has a picture of you on his dresser. Accept God’s *love* and *forgiveness.*”



I had you stand at the beginning of this sermon today and we discovered there are many people who have been a part of this church family for 30 ... over 40 years. *I praise God for you and your being part of this family for all these years!* You are here because you love this church ... *not* the building ... **THE PEOPLE.**

When you are part of the church for 40 years, there’s only **ONE reason why you’re here** – because over the years you’ve been able to **FORGIVE** those people who are also part of the church who have hurt you. You see there’s no way around it, you can’t be part of the *human* family without **having people hurt YOU** ... without **YOU** hurting others.

The **ONLY WAY** in which you can stay in a church family like this, is when you **learn to forgive** the **MINISTERS** who do stupid things and other **MEMBERS** who do things that hurt you.

The **ONLY WAY** in which you can stay in a church family like this, is because you **understand** that the basis for our existence is the **LOVE OF GOD** and the **FORGIVENESS** we find in Christ Jesus ... *that WE are FORGIVEN and CALLED to FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER.*



The last thing I want to say to those of you who are struggling with unforgiveness in your life, is **ACCEPT** God’s **LOVE** and **FORGIVENESS**. If you continue to **REFUSE** God’s love, you’re **breaking** God’s heart.

Don’t you know that God has **YOUR** picture on his dresser?

ACCEPT GOD’S LOVE.

Amen and Amen.