

## **Pillars of Joy: Forgiveness**

### **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

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Every time the first weekend of the month rolls around, we celebrate Holy Communion. When we do, we say the same ancient prayer that Christians around the world say over the Eucharist - it's called "The Great Thanksgiving". While sometimes we add pieces that connect to whatever is happening in the church - Advent or Confirmation or the start of Lent, whatever the season and wherever it is prayed, "The Great Thanksgiving" always includes a few distinct parts. It tells the story of God's creation of the world and of humanity, of God's steadfast love for us no matter what we do, of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection, and of the Last Supper. It always ends with calling on the Holy Spirit to bless our Communion elements and to bless us - uniting us to Christ, to each other, and in ministry to the world. At the end of The Great Thanksgiving, we join our voices in the prayer that Christ-followers have said ever since Jesus taught it to the disciples.

And then comes a special moment in the liturgy that has its very own name - the fraction. This is the point at which the pastor lifts the loaf and breaks it saying something like, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ." We say this to remind ourselves that no matter how different we might be from each other in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and stage of life, abilities and disabilities, and socioeconomic background, we are one body in Christ. We are a community called to imitate Christ in love, compassion, grace, and forgiveness.

Of course, we all know that isn't easy. We all bring our own stories into this community or into any relationship. We have expectations, values, old fears, passionate beliefs, and unconscious biases, and there are times when we hurt each other - intentionally or unintentionally. We feel angry or threatened or disappointed. We say something unkind or mean-spirited. We make assumptions and judgments. Or we are the target of someone else's unkindness or fear or bias. In the messiness that is inevitable in human relationships, how do we ultimately get to the place where we can forgive?

This is the next in our sermon series based on *The Book of Joy* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We have been looking at those qualities we can develop within ourselves that, even in the most difficult or painful of circumstances, can lead us to a place of inner joy. This week our focus is on forgiveness; but before we jump to Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama, let's start with how Paul speaks to the Ephesians about relationships, faith, and forgiveness.

The Letter to the Ephesians, which is traditionally attributed to Paul but may have been written by one of his followers, is sometimes called the instruction manual for the Church. It was written to a multicultural church made up of mostly Jews and Hellenists who had, of course, a diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds. Paul's letter is meant to teach them how to live in community with each other - how to be the body of Christ. Earlier in chapter 4, he writes about the gift of new life we each receive through baptism. Now, he believes we are called to live and to

love differently in response to that gift. In our scripture passage for today, he paints a picture of what that might look like.

“Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Paul focuses a lot in this passage on how we speak to each other. We should speak honestly with each other which means being honest with ourselves first. Then he says, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” In our church family and in our world, as Christ-followers our role is to build up other people not tear them down.

Yet, Paul is realistic. He knows that communities will always have conflicts and people will get angry. “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” Paul doesn’t condemn anger itself but warns of the dangers of holding onto anger. When we leave anger unresolved and unspoken, it festers - leading us toward bitterness and resentment. Bitterness and resentment open the door for the devil because they cloud our judgment, which can lead us to unhealthy and destructive behaviors. Rather than holding on to anger, Paul instructs us, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

So, how do we do that? This is where the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu are such amazing teachers for us. Each of these wise men have offered forgiveness and witnessed acts of forgiveness in extraordinary circumstances. Naturally, Archbishop Tutu has a wealth of stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In honor of Mother’s Day, I will share one involving a group of mothers. He says, “In one instance during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we had mothers of some young people who had been lured by those working with the apartheid system into a booby trap where they were killed. One of the mothers said she switched on her television set and saw the body of her son being dragged. And apart from her anguish at the death of her son, there was a deep, deep anger at his body being treated as if it were the carcass of an animal...The one who betrayed these young people came and appeared in front of these mothers and asked for their forgiveness. When the mother of the young man who had been dragged through the street saw the traitor, she took off her shoe and threw it at him. We had to adjourn for a little while, but then during the break came a totally fantastic moment when the spokesperson for all the mothers came to the perpetrator, embraced him, and said, ‘My child, we forgive you.’ Now I’m not saying that comes easily, but we do have a nobility of spirit. Indeed, no one is incapable of forgiving and no one is unforgivable.”

A young boy wrote to the Dalai Lama and asked, “Can you forgive China for all of the harm and pain they have caused you and your people? Do they deserve it?” His response was, “I deliberately tried to keep compassion and a sense of concern for the Chinese hardliners. I tried to take their anger, their fear, into myself and give them my love, my forgiveness. This is our Buddhist practice of give and take. In our struggle, we deliberately try to stop ourselves from developing anger or hatred ... to keep a sense of compassion, sense of concern for their well-being.”

Whether we seek to forgive ourselves or others, how do we get to that place? In part, we recognize what forgiveness is not. Both the Dalai Lama and Archbishop speak out strongly about this. Forgiveness is not forgetting the harm we’ve done or has been done to us. Forgiveness is not

accepting or approving of the harmful behavior. And forgiveness is not a sign of weakness. In fact, the Archbishop jokes, “Those who think forgiveness is a sign of weakness haven’t tried it.”

The Dalai Lama draws a distinction between the act and the actor. “Where the wrong action is concerned, it may be necessary to take appropriate counteraction to stop it. Toward the actor, or the person, however, you can choose not to develop anger and hatred. This is where the power of forgiveness lies - not losing sight of the humanity of the person while responding to the wrong with clarity and firmness.”

And, as I have said in sermons before, Archbishop Tutu teaches a fourfold path of forgiveness. The first is telling the story. Like Paul in Ephesians, the archbishop stresses that all forgiveness begins with facing and speaking the truth. Secondly, we have to name the hurt we experienced. Third is to grant forgiveness. Much like the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Tutu believes “the ability to forgive comes from the recognition of our shared humanity. Can you accept the humanity of the person who hurt you and the fact that they likely hurt you out of their own suffering? We also recognize that, especially between intimates, there can be multiple hurts, and we often need to forgive and ask forgiveness at the same time, accepting our part in the human drama. Finally, the fourth part of the path to forgiveness is to either work to renew the relationship or to let it go, release it.

Why should we put this effort into forgiving? One reason is that it is good for our physical health. Recent studies have shown that when we focus on our anger or remember our grudges, our bodies react with a stress response with increase in blood pressure and heart rate. Another study found that not forgiving seems to compromise the immune system.

Yet, forgiveness is also good for our emotional, mental, and spiritual health. The archbishop says, “Forgiveness is the only way to heal ourselves and to be free from the past.”

This is true not just for us individually but communally, as well. We are living in a time of so much division - division between political parties, division over wearing masks, division over Covid regulations, division over police killings and our country’s history of systemic racism, and even division over what should be said or done in our church community. My prayer is that our congregation can be a microcosm of God’s kingdom, an example to our community and country of speaking truth and listening openly, acknowledging our mistakes and naming our hurts, asking to be forgiven and offering forgiveness. That we might be as Paul describes “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.” That we might be, in our words and our actions, the body of Christ.

May it be so. Amen.