

## 2 Corinthians 2:1-10

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians recognizes the struggles of Christian life and offers words of encouragement and hope. The start of this letter as we heard last week, focussed on what God can do and emphasized the need for God's hand in reconciliation. God makes comfort and consolation available to us. Now Paul moves on to forgiveness which is needed to heal this community of betrayed and broken relationships.

Paul's previous visit to Corinth was a difficult one. Sharp words were spoken, leaving Paul feeling wounded. It appears that one of the members of the Corinthian church had confronted Paul face-to-face, embarrassed him, shamed him, and denigrated him publicly, placing him in the centre of this conflict.

Paul wanted to revisit the Corinthians, but he did not want to cause them pain. Paul writes, "So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit." Paul has been pained, first by an individual, and then by a community, that didn't support or defend him. He also writes as one who has experienced exclusion from the community.

He did not write the letter to cause them pain; he wrote it out of his overflowing love and deep joy in them. It appears that as a result of his letter the community did strongly rebuke the person who created the problem and took action against him, punishing him or maybe even banishing him from the community.

Paul responds to this shattered and frayed community's reaction to his letter, by encouraging them, building them up, advising and strengthening them so that they can confront and deal with these destroyed relationships. So Paul urges them to forgive or release, and console that individual so that he might not be swallowed up with overwhelming shame.

Paul understood community to be more than a network group, social media, or a gathering of people who think and look like us. Community, to Paul, was people who console each other, who are there for each other, who support, encourage and comfort each other in difficult situations.

In this second chapter of this letter, Paul names another crucial quality of community. It is the element of forgiveness. Disciples of Jesus are called to be consoling and forgiving people. Consolation and forgiveness are two expressions of love. Jesus instructed his disciples saying, "This is my commandment that you love one another." The reason Paul stresses the importance of forgiving and the mutuality involved in his forgiving anyone they forgive, is that both he and the Corinthians all stand together before the "face" of Christ, the source of their life together.

Relationships are messy. Family relationships, friendships, relationships between governments

and citizens, even relationships within the body of Christ, and especially the church. Relationships in the church and among the church members are messy because we always hope that people will know better or act better. We have high expectations and standards that we hope will be met by the community of faith, forgetting sometimes that walking through the doors of the church building doesn't suddenly turn us into perfect people. Unfortunately, even in the church we still hurt each other. We still make decisions from selfish positions. We still fear that which is unfamiliar and push away those who are different. We try not to, but we do.

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had been badly bruised. It's uncertain what the actual cause was. When someone hurts us, there is a temptation to respond by hurting them. When one is attacked they will attack with even more force. Paul offers another alternative.

He calls for a different way of dealing with one who has offended not just him, but the whole community with their actions. He calls for the church to show forgiveness and offer consolation. His concern is that the one who hurt him may end up feeling the same sorrow Paul himself felt when he was not supported or defended by the community making him feel excluded from the community. He urges the church to forgive and reaffirm their love for the individual.

So, what is forgiveness? The common definition would be: forgive, forget, let bygones be bygones. According to Paul, it's not that easy. Paul says that first, the Corinthians need to recognize and name what has transpired. They need to take collective action. But, these people simply haven't let go.

Paul is dealing with a congregation that can't let it go. He doesn't want what has transpired to define their future. In order to move ahead, rather than simply letting go, they have to name the problem, the destructive action, the transgression, the cause of the strife in the congregation. Only then can they move beyond the strife so it doesn't become the defining moment for relationships going forward.

For Paul, genuine forgiveness can only happen when we hold people accountable for their destructive, damaging behaviour. Once they account for and own the destructive behaviour, they can be offered release. For Paul, this is an interplay between holding the guilty party accountable and the offering of a word of release which allows for a new future.

This is integrated into Paul's understanding of forgiveness. Simply put - forgiveness requires repentance, which requires acknowledgement, ownership, humbleness, and contrition. That is the only way an individual, a community, a congregation can move ahead toward a new future together.

Paul shows vulnerability in his letter, courage and honesty rather than sulking away or keeping his frustration bottled up. This will facilitate, true reconciliation. Communities are interrelated. When one is hurt all are hurt. The call is to reconciliation not retaliation in our relationships. The church will always be made up of imperfect human beings. Yet, through open, honest, and vulnerable communication, with the unity of the body in mind, and with the goal of grace-filled reconciliation before us, we just might end up being perfectly forgiving.

What makes forgiveness more difficult in the culture in which we live is that this society sees forgiveness not as a virtue, not even as a necessity, but as a weakness. Our society, our world has a total disregard for forgiveness. We exalt vengeance and retaliation. Consequently people are filled with bitterness, anger, hate and vengeance. People make heroes out of the vindictive, and out of the vengeful, the Rambos, the Dirty Harrys, who find joy in the kill.

The price of vengeance is high. It fills culture with hatred, bitterness, animosity, wrath, retribution. And beyond what it does to a society is what it does to an individual. First, it imprisons people in their past. They can never get on with life. As long as you fail to forgive the offender, the one who offended you, you are shackled to them, shackled to that past act. The pain is kept alive as you pick at the open sore, keeping it from healing. You are sentencing yourself to feel as bad now as you did then and no relief in sight. **You are choosing to love to hate.**

Not only are you being imprisoned in your past, but you become a victim of bitterness. Bitterness is an infectious cancer in the heart. It is devastating and malignant, producing hurtful thoughts and memories that distort your whole life. Anger dominates, rage is out of control, emotions are unchecked. You entertain desperate ideas for revenge. Joy and peace are gone and life is filled with turmoil.

On the other hand, forgiveness is freeing, liberating, peace-giving, joy-bringing. It makes sense to forgive. It is healthy. It is wholesome. It is sensible. It relieves tension. It produces joy. It brings peace. It solicits love. More than that, forgiveness is the most noble thing one saint can do for another, it is Christianity at its highest level. The virtue and nobility of forgiveness can be seen as the most godlike act a person can do. Nothing that you can possibly do is more like God than to forgive. Our God is indeed a forgiving God.

Forgiveness affirms that there is no anger, there is no hatred, there is no desire for vengeance, there is no retaliation because there remains no guilt, no blame. The sin is forgotten, removed, eliminated, never to be entertained again.

That may be easy to say, but what does it look like in practice? Some time ago I read a book by

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelin, called, "I Shall Not Hate, a Gaza Doctor's Journey." According to Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, "This story is a necessary lesson against hatred and revenge."

In 2008, the Dr. Abuelin's wife died of leukemia, leaving him with eight children ages six to twenty-one. On January 16, 2009, the day before he and his children were preparing to leave for Toronto, where he was offered a position by University of Toronto, Israeli shells hit his home, in the Gaza strip. His children were in the bedroom where a shell exploded killing three of his daughters and a niece, their bodies torn apart, beheaded and their lives obliterated. Two of the children suffered shrapnel wounds. How do you not hate and avoid rage?

He vowed not to hate and avoided rage because of his strong faith as a Muslim. He said, "the Quran taught me that we must endure suffering patiently and to forgive those who create the man-made injustices that cause human suffering. The most holy things in this universe are humanity and freedom. I learned from the Quran that the whole world is one human family." He believes that you must choose not to spiral into rage. All that the desire for revenge and hatred does is drive away wisdom, increase sorrow and prolong strife. How could this man forgive? How could he not hate or seek revenge?

Paul could readily forgive someone else a small offense because he had been forgiven such massive offenses by God: blasphemy, injury to Christians, murder and considered himself the chief of sinners. Being forgiven he found it in his own heart rather easy to forgive those who offended him.

So, how does forgiveness work for us? Somebody offends you once and you say, "I'm not going to take that." Then somebody talks you into forgiveness and you say, "Well, once maybe, but if they do it again, I don't know." And then somebody reads you rabbinic law and the rabbis said, "Forgive three times," and you say, "Okay, okay, I'll go three." And the fourth offense comes and you say, "Well that's the end." And then somebody takes you to Matthew and you hear Peter say, "How many times shall I forgive? Seven?" And you say "I'll go for it - seven, that's as far as I'm going." And then you hear the words of Jesus, "No, seventy times seven." And you say, "Whoops, I have to forgive 490 times?"

Paul used every opportunity he could to help others grow in their lives as disciples of Jesus. He explains how injury affects the entire community. "But if anyone has caused pain," Paul pens, "He has caused it not just to me, but to all of you." Forgiveness is usually not just an individual action, but an action of the entire community. Paul has forgiven the person or persons who injured him. Now he instructs the Corinthian church to forgive the individual as well.

Paul sought to rebuild the Corinthian Christian community by encouraging them to forgive and reinstate the offender into the group, with all the rights and responsibilities of being a member of the Corinthian fellowship. The community moves on -together. They are able to console each other when appropriate. They can forgive one another when needed and they can continue to grow in their walk with Jesus by encouraging each other. Their forgiveness has freed them for service.

But, just as Paul called for accounting for one's transgressions, God expects accounting and repentance. Summing it up, an anonymous saint long ago wrote: "Revenge indeed seems often sweet to men, but it is only sugared poison and its aftertaste is bitter as hell. Forgiving, enduring love alone is sweet and blissful. It enjoys peace in the consciousness of God's favour."

Forgiveness wipes away and annihilates the injury, it treats the one injuring as if he had not injured and therefore feels no more the smart and sting that he inflicted. Forgiveness brings heaven to earth and heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God, the forgiving Father. Forgiveness is the advancement of Christ's Kingdom in the world."

Community is not easy; it doesn't come naturally. In order for community to be authentic there needs to be an intentionality. There is a conscious decision by every disciple of Jesus to be outwardly focussed (as opposed to self-centeredness) and to make consoling and forgiving an everyday part of life together.

Such communities transformed the world in the centuries following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Such communities can change the world today, as well, if they follow through with genuine forgiveness and love for one another. Amen.