

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

September 13, 2020

It's Just Cheeseburgers

Rev. Susie Maxwell

As promised, this is part two of a theme on forgiveness. You know, sometimes I can't remember what I had for breakfast, but you can bet I'm able to recall every single detail when it comes to being wronged.

So Let Us Pray . . .

Earlier this summer, I entered one of two lanes at a McDonald's drive through. Gotta have that cheeseburger value meal for the long drive to Brunswick. I always approach those 2-lane set ups with anxiety. What if they mix the orders up? Or what if someone goes in the wrong sequence? And what if somebody is just a plain old jerk?

Well, I encountered that plain old jerk as I went to take my turn leaving one of the lanes. It was a torturously hot day and this enormous new, SUV with tinted windows began to pull into my place in line. Since my A/C isn't functioning, my windows were already down and so smiling and waving to the dark glass I said, "I think it's my turn!"

No big deal. Everybody understands following the rules and turn-taking. We all learned that in kindergarten and it's at the core of basic decency. Certain that the person behind the tinted windows must have been distracted with a phone, I continued to pull into the lane for the drive up window.

Much to my surprise, the SUV cut me off. The tinted window lowered and so I gestured (like what are you doing?) and he smirked while edging me out. I said nothing as I fell in line behind him and I was startled by the rage I felt. And yet, it was just cheeseburgers, so I kept it all to myself. And as I held it in, he held his camera up to his sideview mirror and took a picture of me.

With all that's going on in the world, I think what offended me the most was that in his willful act of cutting me off, his smirk said he enjoyed it.

When I pulled up to the first window, I said to the cashier, "I think that kid in front of me took my turn."

She looked at me like I was 5 years old.

And as I headed back down route 1, I angrily stuffed my face with French fries.

Jesus' teaching this morning has something to say about such things as we continue in Matthew's chapter instructing the early believers on

living in community. This morning, it's about forgiveness. You may have caught Peter's question during Snow's reading. The question Peter asks Jesus isn't *should* I forgive, it's *how often* should I forgive. That we should forgive is understood. Peter's suggestion of 7 times proposes that he wants forgiveness wrapped up quickly.

But Jesus' response of seventy times seven is perhaps another way of saying forgiveness is something we do over and over again — maybe because Jesus understands that our separation from God — or sinning — happens over and over again. Peter himself will come to deny Jesus 3 times. So Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is like the king who wished to settle his accounts with his slaves. In the story, God is the king and the slave represents the rest of us.

In God's constant call for repentance and reconciliation, this story is kinda like God's way of saying: Let me show you how it's done. I forgave you a debt that you never stood a chance of repaying anyway — so in return, I want you to also forgive.

Now the king clearly does not do the math in his head, for if he had, he would never have given in. Instead, the king acts from his heart and so forgives his slave of the debt owed. Wipes it out. Boom. It's gone. The point being that forgiveness is not about the math and keeping count, it's about repentance and reconciliation.

The Greek word used in the Scripture is (af-ee'-ay-mee) *aphiemi*, which means:

To send away,

To leave alone,

To permit to depart,

To forgive.

But when it comes to God and forgiveness, it seems our God of unconditional love actually has some conditions:

Within verse 32 *I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.* The first condition? God forgives us when we ask for forgiveness

and Boom. It's gone. It's over. Just like that. It's beyond my understanding, but I accept this gift of mysterious and divine grace and mercy — there must be something about the owning up, the admitting and the naming where the mystery occurs.

Yet, as I said, God's not talking about working or doing the math from your head — God's talking about working from your heart. If we don't, then the second condition kicks in: Hear it within verse 34 *And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*

Beloveds, when we don't forgive, or don't send the hurt away, when we don't leave the wrong alone, or permit it to depart — it means we are holding onto it — so, when we don't forgive, aren't we handing ourselves over to be tortured as well? How long have you suffered with anger or a grudge or a deep hurt because of holding onto something someone has done to you?

Did you hear all the detail in my story of grudge? So much junk to hold onto. And for what?

When I'm carrying a hurt or a grudge, I bring it to God and ask for help letting it go. In the story I shared, I ended up feeling sorry for the guy. What a small life he must live to get a kick out of pettiness. So in this case, it was easy to forgive and move on.

But what about big trespasses? Ten Commandment stuff? What about lines that are crossed and hurts that are so deep that you feel as if your soul has been scarred. And your heart hardened or broken.

In Jesus' story, the one who was forgiven, did not want to forgive in turn — and compared to what the king did for him, it would have been nothing for the slave to forgive what meagerness was owed him. But he didn't do it —

That's when we hear the heaviness of the story — forgive as you have been forgiven or else you'll be tortured.

As I said earlier, our holding onto hurts can be torturous.

As with most things Scriptural, it seems easier said than done. One of the most common questions I hear is, “How do I forgive?”

Jesus never said it would be easy. He said you gotta work at it.

A lot. Peter’s suggestion of seven times is deeply inadequate.

Jesus said more like seventy times seven.

Jesus’ teaches us that if God can forgive us when we bring our miserable, broken, and sinful selves before God — and Lord knows, I’ve brought my own mighty deep wrongs before God — then God expects us to offer the same to another.

Blake Coffee, Founder and Executive Director of Christian Unity Ministries, urges Christians to think of forgiveness as a promise — whereby forgiveness is not something we wait to do, it is a commitment we make right up front, just as soon as the pain has occurred. Why? Because God has first forgiven us. And that’s how God works.

Coffee writes that most of us wait to forgive until we feel like we can do it, or are ready to do it, but the way the Bible describes forgiveness, it's not a feeling at all, for if we waited until we *felt* like we could forgive, it **would never happen.**

And it is hard to do. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it. Coffee reminds us that the very act of forgiveness tends to separate Christ's church from the rest of the world. It is a distinguishing characteristic of Christ followers. We have been forgiven much, so we forgive.

Beloveds, that means forgiveness is an act of faith between each one of us and God. In a transactional world that loves to keep score, this act of mercy and grace of God's is absolutely baffling.

But go and do likewise anyway, because it doesn't matter if the wrong is over a crumb, a cheeseburger value meal, or a 7 course dinner with linen napkins and a violinist. It's all the same measure in God's eyes.

So as you move through this new week, my prayer for you is that you keep forgiving, even when it feels impossible. Lest we forget that on the night when Judas will betray him and Peter and the other disciples will abandon him, Jesus announces to all, “This is the blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” God forgives us first because of God’s love for us — and having experienced forgiveness at the hands of God and God’s people, we are then called to make it possible for others to experience it. In doing so, the circle of Christ’s love expands ever wider to encircle one more lost sheep—and another—and another, ushering in the Kingdom of God.