

“Teaching Forgiveness”

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15).

Today is “Christian Education Sunday.” New Bible classes start today, Sunday School is back in session and today in worship, we formally dedicate ourselves to Christian education at every level. But before we let this day pass by, we need to step back for a second and talk about what we really mean by the phrase Christian education. While Christian education is grounded in the teaching of Holy Scripture, it’s not simply intellectually learning what the Bible says or even mastering our behavior. Christian education is all about Jesus. “Christian education” is about understanding that the person and work of Jesus Christ is at the center of everything we are and do and think and say...and because this is true, what Christian education really boils down to is teaching forgiveness!

Almost all of us say that we should practice forgiveness, but the truth is...*we don’t*. In a recent Gallup poll, 94% of Americans said, “it was important to forgive.” And yet the same survey indicated that only 48% said they actually try to forgive others. When we feel we have been sinned against, most of us will harbor angry thoughts, or gossip about the offender, or even try to fix the problems that have been created by their sin...in fact we’ll do about anything as long as we don’t have to talk to them. Maybe, we are afraid to offend. Maybe we think it’s disrespectful to interfere in someone else’s life. Maybe, we’re secretly afraid that the person will apologize for their sin and we’ll actually have to forgive them. Whatever the reason, much of the sin that causes us anxiety and destroys our relationships is never confronted and ultimately, that means it’s never forgiven. And nothing could be further from what God teaches in His Word.

In Leviticus, God tells us that the person who refuses to rebuke or confront his brother, “hates” his brother and then takes it even further saying that not only *should* we confront sin, but that when we ignore the sin of our brother we, “share in his guilt” (Leviticus 19:17). In today’s reading from Ezekiel, God tells us that we are watchmen, charged with the task of warning our brothers and sisters when they are in spiritual danger. And when we fail in this work, the consequences are severe. Listen again to these words of warning from God: “If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked one, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his ways, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ezekiel 33:8).

God’s Word is crystal clear: We are our brother’s keeper! We have a responsibility to confront and deal with sin, and this issue is so serious to God and so important for our lives that in today’s Gospel reading Jesus gives us a step-by-step procedure for confronting our brothers and sisters and it begins in the most basic way: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, just between you and him alone” (Matthew 18:15).

Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you...” When we hear these words about our brother’s sin we may be inclined to minimize it to a sin that is personally committed against us, but we need to understand that in the eyes of God *any sin* is a sin against the body of Christ. About this verse one commentator writes that, “if a member of the Church sins...then he has sinned against me, he has violated the honor of God, which is the chief concern of the believer. What is done to a believer in Jesus is (actually) performed as (a sin) against Jesus” (Ylvisaker). With this understanding, the “sin” of our brother described in verse 15 can be any sin, because any sin endangers the health of the body.

Jesus then says, “go.” Go. Don’t sit and stew about the wrong you have witnessed. Don’t discuss the problem with others who aren’t involved. Don’t even wait for the guilty party to apologize. Go! As Christian people, practicing forgiveness means that we are proactive in the process. We take the initiative. We go to our brother or sister, we seek them out – we pursue them if we have to – so that, in love, restoration can begin. And once we have their attention, Jesus says we are to, “tell him his fault, just between you and him alone.” Jesus understood the delicate dynamics of accountability, and He gives us these instructions to underscore the purpose of the process. This is not about having control in a relationship; this is not about gaining moral high ground, or

being able to say, “I told you so.” The process of confronting sin is always and only about restoration. It is about bringing healing. It is about teaching forgiveness!

As difficult as it may be, confrontation must be practiced in order for healing to happen. This can be hard, gut-wrenching work, and if all God did was instruct us to confront and forgive, it would be an impossible task for us. But God’s Word doesn’t stop with this command. Jesus gives us the instructions to forgive in the context of the incredible promise that we too have been forgiven, and because of this promise we can confront. We can go to our brother in love! We can have difficult discussions and, ultimately, we can forgive because we have been forgiven and this truth changes everything!

The root meaning of the word forgive, is literally “to completely give,” and this phrase is a wonderful description of what Christ has done for us. In a love that we can’t begin to comprehend, Christ gave everything. Where we are afraid to confront sin, Jesus met sin head on. Where we have failed as watchmen, Jesus succeeded and, rather than let us die, Jesus actually took the responsibility and sentence for our sin. On the cross, our sin has been confronted, and it has been punished, and the results are that we have been forgiven, we have the promise of eternal life, and *God has also given us the power to forgive!*

Please don’t miss this: *Because of Christ we can forgive!* This is a monumental concept and it is critical for us to hear. *God has given us the authority to forgive!* When the leader of a country makes an agreement or treaty with another nation, it would be meaningless if that leader didn’t have the authority to follow through with the action promised, and if we didn’t have the authority to forgive, Jesus’ instructions to us in Matthew 18 would be utterly worthless. But because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the whole world (John 3:16), God has given us as His body the Church the power and the authority to forgive. That is precisely what Jesus was saying when He told the disciples, “whatever you loose (forgive) on earth will be loosed (forgiven) in heaven.”

We have been forgiven, and because of this incredible gift we have been given the power to offer forgiveness to others – not only our personal forgiveness, but also the forgiveness of God! And that is the job of the church! We have been justified, we have been sanctified and we have been called to forgive, and when we confront sin and go through the process of forgiveness, we truly do the work of Christian education...and the stakes couldn’t be higher. Our actions in this life have eternal ramifications and when we ignore sin for any reason, we risk losing a brother. But when, by God’s power, we step out in love to confront a brother or sister, we carry on the work that Jesus accomplished on the cross, and God promises to use us in ways that will have eternal results.

The job of the Church – our job – is to live, practice and teach forgiveness, and as we carry out that work with the people in our lives, the results are life-saving. Jesus says that when we confront sin and there is repentance and forgiveness, we have “gained a brother.” When we forgive, miracles happen. Relationships are restored, wounds are healed and lives are enriched. Not only does forgiveness change things in our earthly lives, Jesus says that when one sinner repents, “there is rejoicing” in heaven (Luke 15:10) and this doesn’t happen on some ephemeral, cosmic scoreboard...it happens in our lives. It happens in the relationships we have with family members, co-workers, neighbors and even with the people sitting next to you this morning.

When it comes right down to it, forgiveness is the only thing that matters. Theologian Karl Barth once remarked, “It is always the case that when the Christian looks back (on his life), he is looking at the forgiveness of sins.” Christ has completely given Himself to save us from sin and because we can look back to the cross, we can also look to the future as forgiven people, and we can change the lives of others forever as we model and teach forgiveness. And that is what Christian Education is all about. Amen.

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