

LENT #4: GIVING UP OUR RESENTMENTS

(03/19/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 18:21-22
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” (Matthew 18:21-22)

"Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." (Meister Eckhart)

In our worship this Lenten season, we have been focusing on the practice of “giving up.” As the thirteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart has said, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." Buddhism reminds us that suffering arises as a result of our attachments. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world, we need to identify that which we grasp or seek to control and learn to let this go. We need to identify and let go of that which holds us back from the experience of new life in Christ.

The self-centeredness that underlies all our attachments is the cause of our suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. We not only believe; we act as if the world revolves around us. This self-centeredness or ego-centeredness needs to be replaced by God-centeredness. In the words of the apostle Paul, we need to die to the old self to be reborn, to enter the new life that is offered to us by Christ and in Christ.

The first week we focused on giving up our illusions, specifically the illusion that we are without sin, that we might enter into a discipline of honest self-reflection. The second week we examined how our attachment to material possessions can create a barrier between us and our brothers and sisters, between us and God. Last week we looked at our obsession with the future, not only our negative expectations of the future, which is the root cause of our anxiety, but even those goals and objectives that become the standards by which we judge ourselves and others. Each of these barriers is grounded in self-centeredness. The solution to each is to learn to let it go. Or, as the Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck has suggested, to “see through their emptiness.” When we see how empty, how impermanent our attachments are, they fade away like a sandcastle in the face of a rising tide.

This morning I would like us to examine another barrier which can hold us back from the experience of new life in Christ. This is the barrier of the past.

The future is not real; it is an illusion. The past is also not real; it is a memory. In fact, it is a distorted memory. Our memories of the past have been unconsciously selected, often grouped or clustered around a certain theme, which C. G. Jung would call a complex. For

example, people who have a victim complex, who see themselves as victims, retain memories of how cruel people have been to them, while people who do not have a victim complex retain a more diverse range of memories. Our memories create the picture we have of the world, of life, of our life. However, the picture we have of the world may also create, distort, or help us select and store specific memories, while the memories that don't fit our unconscious schema, that aren't congruent with the complex simply fade away.

Time is a very complex phenomenon. However, I think we would all agree that the past was real. It happened; it happened to us, though we might be a little more circumspect about our belief that the reality of the past, whatever that is, is identical to the way we experienced it and remember it. We would all agree that the past helped to create the present, to create us. It is always helpful to identify the ways in which not the past, but *our experience of the past* has shaped the present, has shaped us. Ultimately, however, we have to let the past go. We have to live life in the present, to see the present through new eyes, not through spectacles which were handed to us in the past or by the past.

The inability to let go of the past can prevent us from living life fully in the present and can prevent us from creating a better future. Take the example of international conflicts, e.g., the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. I am a very hopeful, optimistic person, but I have my doubts if they are ever going to be able to live together in peace. Why? Because they both not only remember the past; they live their lives on the basis of the past.

The Israelis remember every atrocity that has been perpetrated by the Palestinians. They remember how many Israelis died from Palestinian suicide bombers. They can tell you all the times that Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have broken the terms of treaties. These events are in their personal, collective, or cultural memory banks. The problem is that the Israelis are attached to their own experience of the past in such a way that it cuts them off from the present and the possibility of creating a just and peaceful future.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, remember every atrocity that has been perpetrated by the Israeli military and by ultra-orthodox settlers on their land. They remember how their land, their country was given to Israel by the United Nations in 1948, how they became refugees in their own land. They remember every Palestinian civilian who has been killed, every house that has been leveled by Israeli bulldozers. Because of their attachment to the past, they are unable to sit down at table with the Israelis and work out a solution to their problems, to divide the land, to recognize and respect each other's right to exist, and to find a way to share access to the holy sites that have deep meaning and significance to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as well.

When I was traveling in India in 1999, at the time of an outbreak of hostility between India and Pakistan concerning control of the Indian province of Kashmir in the upper northwest corner, not far from Dharamsala, the Tibetan refugee settlement that Corey and I visited, and where Tenzin Norzin, the little Tibetan girl that our church supports lives and goes to school, I discovered that the people of India were clear about the situation. The province technically belongs to India, even though its population is over 97% Muslim. The Indians had a good grasp of the history of the conflict--from their perspective. I didn't doubt that what they said about the Muslim persecution of Hindus following the dissolution of the British Empire was correct. I just wondered what kind of history I might hear if I were talking with people in Pakistan.

From my reading, the Hindus were as inhumane in their treatment of Muslims who were living in India as the Muslims were to the Hindus that were living in East and West Pakistan. India and Pakistan, who are neighbors, need to live together in peace and harmony. I don't see how this can happen, how the future of Kashmir can be decided, until each lets go of their attachment to the hurts of the past and sits down at table with the one who is seen as the enemy, until each recognizes the validity of the other's experience of the past, and then both become vulnerable enough to take a chance on creating a future.

By the way, on January 30, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated not by a Muslim terrorist, but by a Hindu nationalist who took offense at Gandhi's belief that Hindus and Muslims ought to be able to live together in the same country in peace and harmony. I am saddened by the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India today, in a country that I always viewed as a melting pot of various religions and cultures, and the decision of the present government, the Bhartiya Janata Party (the BJP), to downplay the memorial observance of Gandhi's assassination and what this great man stood for—diversity, inclusion, and living in peace and harmony with those who are different from us.

In Northern Ireland, both the Catholics and the Protestant know the history of atrocities perpetrated by the other. The Irish people remember January 30, 1972, when British paratroopers in Derry, Northern Ireland opened fire on unarmed civil rights demonstrators, killing fourteen, and they remember the other atrocities perpetrated by the English troops that occupied Northern Ireland during "The Troubles." The English remember how Sinn Fein assassinated English military personnel who were stationed in Northern Ireland, and how they killed English civilians by planting bombs just outside department stores in downtown London. Each country's attachment to the past has become a justification for not negotiating with the other in the present.

The Armenians remember the Armenian Holocaust, the murder of over a million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks in 1915-16, and they take offense at Turkey's unwillingness to

own up to this disgraceful part of its history. I believe the Armenians are correct in their description of the genocide. However, when we cling to the past, we throw away the present and the future. This happens far too often following international conflicts. A dichotomy comes into being and becomes solidified, a dichotomy that may persist not only for generations but for centuries, because these dichotomies cannot be resolved through power, no matter how much power either side has.

By the way, I found it both meaningful and touching that Armenia sent a large supply of food, medicine, and other forms of assistance to Turkey following the three recent earthquakes that devastated Turkey and northern Syria. I feel this is a step in the right direction.

The same dynamic is true of us as individuals. Most of us have experienced hurt and betrayal at some times in our lives. If we are honest, however; if we take our own moral inventory as well as the inventory of others, we will admit that we have hurt and betrayed others. The memories of the times and the ways we have hurt others, even those whom we love or who love us, seem to fade from our memory bank. What we retain in our memory bank are the ways that others have hurt us.

Keep your hurts and resentments if you want! Hold them to your heart! I guarantee that they will not only cut you off from the other person; they will cut you off from life. I'm not saying we should be in denial about the past, especially when hurtful things were done to us. What I am suggesting is that we learn to let go of these hurts. By keeping them enshrined in our memory bank and in our hearts, we poison ourselves and we poison our present relationships. The resentment becomes an excuse not to trust, not to be vulnerable, not to love. When this happens, the past has taken away not only our present; it has also taken away our future.

The apostle Paul tells us that love is not resentful. Love does not cling to past hurts. In fact, love heals relationships. Love also heals memories. Love helps us to let go of our self-centered obsession with how we have been wronged that we might live life fully and joyfully.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive. In both the Revised Standard and the King James versions of the Bible, Peter asks how often he should forgive *his brother*. In the New Revised Standard Version, the translation we use, Peter asks how often he should forgive *a member of the church*. I like the previous translations better. First, I have a major problem with my brother, so the matter of forgiving my brother and asking him to forgive me speaks to me personally. Second, I don't see how Peter could have been talking about members of the church when there was no church, so I think this was added to the original account of the conversation. The new translation also implies that we should be more

forgiving of those within our church, our little community, than we should be with others. I find this tribalistic thinking contrary to the heart and mind of Jesus.

Third, I find it interesting that in the newest translation, Jesus tells Peter he should forgive a fellow church member seventy-seven times. In the older translations, Jesus tells Peter he should forgive his brother seventy times seven. That's four hundred ninety! I don't want to get technical, but that's quite a difference—413 times, to be exact! I usually like the translation we use, but this is one time when I find the King James and the Revised Standard Versions much more powerful and meaningful.

Jesus did not cling to the past. He did not harbor resentments. He held no feelings of bitterness toward Peter, who denied him, the disciples who deserted him, and even Judas who betrayed him. When he was dying on the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus was able to let go of the past to live fully in the present. He was not self-centered, focusing on his own hurt; he was God-centered, focusing on God's love for even those who were unconsciously hateful and cruel. In the prayer he taught us, Jesus tells us we should forgive others their trespasses, their debts, their sins, *even as or because we have been forgiven by God.*

Speaking of people's more than marginal propensity to be unconsciously hateful or cruel, this reminds me of a Buddhist story, a parable that I believe is true more often than not.

A fisherman was slowly rowing his boat upstream one morning when the river was enshrouded with mist. Suddenly, through the fog, he saw a boat moving swiftly downstream. The boat was headed straight toward him. The fisherman began to yell to the man in the other boat, "Be careful, be careful; you are heading straight toward me." It was to no avail. The other boat rammed into his, knocking him from his seat, and almost capsizing his little boat. Angry, the fisherman scrambled to his feet, and began to give the man in the other boat a piece of his mind.

But when he looked carefully, he discovered that there was no one in the other boat.

I think this happens more often than we realize. There is no one in the other boat! The "light" may be on, but there is no one "home." This is why Jesus said, of his persecutors, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Think about it. How could you continue to be angry at an empty boat? It just doesn't make sense!

I know what you're thinking. Well, Pastor, it was easy for Jesus to forgive and to encourage forgiveness; after all, he was the incarnation of God. How can you expect me to live like Jesus? How can I forgive my brother, who has wronged me, seventy times seven? This is not what *I* expect of you, it is what *God* expects of *us*. I have to learn to forgive my brother and

ask his forgiveness; I have to forgive everyone who has wronged me, *just as I have to learn to forgive myself for all the conscious or unconscious, all the intentional or unintentional ways I have hurt others.* A good deal of the time, I suspect, there was no one in either of the boats. To use the other metaphor: “the lights may be on, but there is no one home.”

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned by the apartheid government of South Africa for twenty-seven years, six months, and seven days, not for having committed a crime but for advocating equal rights for his people. After he was released, he became the leader of a united South Africa, the president of both whites and blacks. He could do this because he not only harbored no desire for revenge; he harbored no resentment in his heart. How was he able to do this? I don't know what his religion is, but Nelson Mandela had to be a man of faith! There had to be a strong spiritual core at the center of his life!

To forgive is not to erase the past, for the past can never be erased. It is not to wipe the slate clean, which is what some of our scripture lessons suggest. It is to let go of *our attachment* to the past, especially our attachment to the resentments and hurts that we harbor, and which serve to alienate us from those we love, from the possibility of relationship in the present, and from life itself. *It is also to let go of our attachment to our guilt, which can also serve to cut us off from the possibility of relationship in the present and from life itself.*

As we continue our spiritual journey through Lent, let us think about the many ways in which we can be imprisoned by our past, how our memories of the past, which may be distorted or selectively chosen, can cut us off from seeing clearly in the present, how our hurts and resentments can cut us off from the kind of love of which the apostle Paul speaks.

Then let us pray for God's help that we might give them up, offer them up, or see through them to experience the fullness of new life which is promised to us not only by Christ but in Christ.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.