

February 19, 2017

Authentic Christianity
How Forgiving are You?
Matthew 18:21-22

Opening words: Webster defines "authentic" as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a hypocrite. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the life of the church. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. We must be authentic Christians.

This is sermon number seven in my eight-part sermon series, *Authentic Christianity*. True Christianity is designed to be life-altering. It should affect your actions and opinions. We are looking at characteristics that should be within you. To date, we have looked at compassion, hope, faith, perseverance and love. Next week, we look at our priorities. Today, I want you to answer this question: *How forgiving are you?* Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 18:21-22.

Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"
²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Gary Leon Ridgway is better known as the infamous Green River Killer. In 2003, he confessed to the killing of 48 women. In 2011, Ridgway was convicted of the murder of Rebecca Marrero, bringing the victim count to 49. Later, he confessed to killing 60 women. At his sentencing in 2003, the families of the victims had the opportunity to speak directly to Ridgway. Most spoke ugly, hateful words. You really can't blame them. Those words didn't faze the murderer. Robert Rule, the father of one of his victims, took a different path. He spoke these words:

"Mr. Ridgway, there are people here who hate you. I am not one of them. You've made it difficult to live up to what I believe, and what God says to do, and that is to forgive. You are forgiven, Sir."

Those words brought Gary Leon Ridgway to tears.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.*" He is correct. If you think you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. Jesus's time in Galilee is coming to an end. The Master is talking about life in the Kingdom of God. To be more exact, the topic is forgiveness. It is Peter who asks the question, "*Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me?*" Trying to impress Jesus,

he answers his own question. "Up to seven times?" He is confident in his answer because the old rabbinic law said you were required to forgive someone only three times. Seven means Peter has doubled that figure and added one, just to be safe. Seven falls short of Jesus's number. Jesus says you must forgive someone seventy-seven times. The number does not really hold the answer. Jesus is telling Peter, the disciples and us, we must always forgive the one who has done us wrong. To illustrate the point Jesus tells them a story. This is the story:

A king was once settling his debts. One man came who owed the king a large sum of money. Unable to pay, the king threatens to take everything from the man, including his wife and his children. The man begs the king for forgiveness. The king has mercy on the man and completely forgives his debt. Unthankful for what the king had done for him, the man went out and threatened the man who owed him money. In comparison, the amount was very small. That poor fellow begged as well, but no mercy was given. He finds himself in prison. Do you remember how the story ends? In time, the king finds out what his debtor had done and had him thrown into prison, where he was tortured. When Jesus told a story, or when Jesus told a parable, he was only trying to make one point. So, what is the point to this story? This is the point: We should forgive others as God has forgiven us. Can I state the obvious? Forgiveness is a good thing. Forgiveness does not just benefit the one being forgiven. Forgiveness benefits the one who forgives as well.

When you forgive someone, you benefit. When you don't forgive someone, you cause a chemical imbalance within your own body which weakens your immune system. When you don't forgive someone, you are more depressed, stressed and unable to focus. When you don't forgive someone, you damage your relationships with God and others. When you don't forgive someone, you frustrate your own spiritual development. When you forgive someone, you benefit. Forgiveness is a good thing. This is the problem: Forgiving someone is a hard thing to do because our own pride won't let us forgive. We don't want to look foolish. We want to look strong. I know that is true, because it is part of my story.

The spring of 1988 was a transitional time in my life. I can only recall one good thing about that season. Kathryn and I had just met. At that time, she was the only one who really believed in me. Everyone else was critical of me. I had just graduated from seminary and owed, for the time, a large amount of student loan debt. My job prospects were few. I was serving three small United Methodist congregations in Belmont County. I made less than a thousand dollars per month and lived in a neglected parsonage with a worn out gray carpet, which was always cold. With my seminary degree in hand, I went to Canton one day to be interviewed by the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. I needed their blessing to be ordained. With the clock ticking on my student loans, I had to be ordained to make the payments. Ordination meant a little more money. Everyone said, "Don't worry! These are ministers. You will be fine." It still pains me to say it. Everyone was wrong. In my

interview team of three people, I experienced no mercy and felt no love. I was denied for personal reasons. They knew Kathryn. They didn't know me. I was an outsider. Later, I was told, they were trying to protect her from me. To say the least, I was devastated. I drove back to Belmont County and had to tell my churches I had failed. I had to call my family and tell them I had failed. Only one person stood by me, Kathryn. In the months and years that followed, I reviewed my one-sided interview. Every time, I grew more upset. The one thing I have never lacked in the ministry is confidence. I knew God had given me the gifts to be a good pastor. I knew I was a better pastor than anyone on the board. I knew I was a better preacher than anyone on that board. Rising from the ashes of that disappointment, I swore I would never forget what they did to me. I am true to my word. Can I be honest with you? It has been over twenty-five years, but I still get mad thinking about those arrogant fools. I have experienced success and done things my way, but I have never forgotten that day. I have never forgiven that group. Can I state the obvious? My pride just won't let me forgive them. Can you do me a favor? Can you pray for me so I can forgive them? The only one I have damaged is myself. The people who voted against me on that dark day, have long forgotten me. Pray that God will liberate me from my unforgiving heart.

Can anyone here relate to that story? Who in your life do you refuse to forgive? You know it is true. Your broken pride won't let you forgive. This is the problem: Jesus expects us to be able to forgive. It is not Jesus's opinion. Jesus demands that we forgive. That leads me back to our question for today. How forgiving are you?

In the life of the church there are certain "red letter" days. Within the life of this church, there are three. There is Christmas Eve. There is Easter, and there is the GAB Sale. For decades, it has been scheduled on the first weekend in May. GAB stands for Garage, Attic and Basement Sale. It is our annual trash and treasure sale. In my years here, I have learned two things from the GAB Sale. First, we have no shortage of stuff in this community. The fellowship hall is full of all kinds of things. Second, the GAB Sale is a lot of work. Faithful volunteers come the entire week before the sale to sort and price the merchandise. Some of those people, I see regularly. Others, I only see at the sale. Still others, return to the church to just to help. One year a disgruntled inactive church member came back to help at the GAB Sale.

His name is John and this is his story. At one time, he had been a powerful voice within this congregation, but no longer. This is the truth: I was surprised to see him helping with the GAB Sale. The first time I saw him was in the kitchen. He spotted me and smiled. He told me there were few new things in his life to talk about. Instead, he took me on a journey in his "way back" machine. He told me about the time he fixed the leaking sink. He told me about the time he yelled at the kids for making a mess (those kids are now in their mid-forties). He told me about the time he found the church doors unlocked (he saved the day). He told me everything I didn't care about. He talked to me about twenty minutes, but it seemed more like two months. To his ears, he was fascinating. To my ears, he was boring. God heard my silent prayer and the phone

rang. I have never been so relieved to get a sales call. Later that day, I saw John again in the parking lot. The only thing that had changed was the location. Once again, he told me stories about back in the day. However, the topic slightly changed. He began to tell me in detail why he left the church. He must have told that story a million times. It was seamless. Without leaving out a single detail, he told me about that ugly night. It was a church meeting and he had been done wrong. One by one, name by name, he told me about those "hypocrites". He looked me in the eye and told me with all the pride he could muster, he would never forgive them, and had vowed he would never return. He was good on his word; he never did return, until the GAB Sale. When he finally ran out of breath, I said, "That is quite a story. Do you know what all those people have in common?" He said, "No." I said, "They are all dead. However, they still have control over you." He was silent, so I continued. I said, "John, do you know what you need to do?" He gave me the deer in the headlights look. I said, "You need to pray and forgive those people. You need to be liberated from your unforgiving heart." John said, "I don't pray." I said, "You do today." I grabbed his hand and right in the middle of the parking lot, we prayed that his unforgiving heart would be healed. When I finished, I looked at John. He had tears running down his face. His wife was walking by and he said to her, "Russ prayed for me!" She said, "Good, you needed it."

Can I ask you a question? Is there anyone here today who needs to be liberated from an unforgiving heart? How forgiving are you? Remember the words of Mahatma Gandhi, *"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."*

Will you pray with me?