

Sermon Text for June 27, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Matthew 18:21-35, II Kings 2:23-25

“The story of the bald guy”

It is a fun Sunday for me this week. I've been looking forward to having this Sunday for a long time. A Sunday that we have understood would come after many, many months, when we are together in the most normal capacity that we have been in since March of 2020. We are still getting our programs and our activities back on line which includes our coffee hour, we are still looking for a way to put that together. We are coming up a bit short on how to do that, but we will get there. I'm also excited about having family here, one of Stacy's sister, Jena, is here with her daughter Grace and another niece Kate, two of my daughters are here. We also have a former member of our church from Russia, Harold Jackson with his son Paul.

It is also a Sunday that we are just about finished with our new members classes and we have about 10 people who will be joining in a few weeks. Holly is going to be ordained this evening and lose her membership here and take on membership in the Presbytery of Donegal. Part of joining First Presbyterian is the realization that you are taking a new step in your journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ. As a follower of Jesus each one of us has responsibilities that we don't normally have if we were not a follower of Jesus. Every single person who follows Jesus has a certain bar that they have to achieve in the way in which they live their lives. It isn't a free ride where nothing matters how you live or what you do or what you say. There is an expectation, not just as a member, but as a follower, that you will have certain standards and when we fail to meet those standards, there ought to be a realization of that.

We are not perfect. Becoming a member of the church or attending this church perfection is never achieved, but that is where the bar is set. We are all looking to be perfect, not less than perfect. Where we find ourselves falling especially short of the bar that we set is in light of this concept of forgiveness. Our ability and our capability to forgive often is lacking. And yet this is where as Christians we ought to set the bar even higher than others within society or culture. As a Christian forgiveness is at the root, at the base of our Christian faith. We have to be able to not only receive forgiveness, but we have to be able to forgive as well.

Both of our Scriptures this morning address the topic of forgiveness, Jesus does so directly in that first Scripture that we read. In the Old Testament reading we will see it addressed indirectly, and from a negative perspective. Let's read.

READ

So, have you ever chosen a Scripture and then have immediate regrets that you chose it after you read it in front of a group of people? Yeah, me neither. During this sermon series, stories from the Bible, we have seen a few doozies where you are wondering what redeeming value can we find from this? Let's try.

The man who is depicted in this story is the prophet Elisha. You may not know who he was. In this part of Scripture he has just taken over the role of the prophet of the Lord from another prophet whose name was Elijah and he had just gone into heaven in a chariot of fire. Elisha was a prophet of the Lord in the midst of Israel in a time when the land and the people were worshipping foreign gods. Remember Elijah and the prophets of Baal and the battle that they had when Elijah calls fire down from heaven on Mt. Carmel? That was in Israel and the prophets of Baal were under the service of the king of Israel.

Elisha had just taken over the head prophet role and was walking back to begin his work when he runs across these youth who call him baldy. This story is supposed to legitimized Elisha's power. This was supposed to be his installation service so that all could see what his role was now. You need to know that there was a time when I was much younger and my brothers were much younger that we would have competitions to decide who was taller and who had the most hair. It was a big deal. I say was, because we have all pretty much decided that I am the least bald among my family, so I gladly have taken that prize. But apparently Elisha took the insult of being called bald even further than what my brothers and I did.

Now, there may be some who heard this story and took a certain satisfaction in this story. Those juvenile delinquents, those bad boys of Bethel, got exactly what they deserved. To insult God's prophet is to insult God. But ultimately there is no excuse and no getting around the fact that this is a person who is said to follow the same God that we follow react in an atrocious act of vengeance. The bar that is set for being a follower of the God of creation was dramatically lowered in this story.

It is not unusual to find people of God doing ungodly things. We went over a short list last week on Father's Day. But in our first Scripture we find that Jesus leaves no room for revenge or pettiness or indignation or hurt feelings, or holding a grudge. When we begin our Scripture in the New Testament does it stop you a bit in your tracks to read Peter ask a question about a member of the church. How often do we have to forgive those members of our church who hurt our feelings or call us baldy?

That term member of the church is adelphos which literally means brother or member of the family. And Peter asks the question in a way that kind of gives himself a pat on the back. I do it seven times, that's pretty good, right, Jesus? Do we have to forgive those who continue to do the wrong thing and offend us over and over again, especially when they are in the church, or in our family, or in our community, in our country, or in our world?

We have plenty of Scriptures that address forgiveness, probably the most convicting is found in Matthew 6 and vs.14-15. Listen to this appeal from Jesus to us, his followers on forgiveness. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Jesus sets the bar high to be a follower of Jesus. Forgiveness from God is at the foundation of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection means that we are forgiven. Hear that and believe it. But the bar is set high in regards to how we forgive those around us.

Just as we freely receive forgiveness, we have to freely give it as well. In this Scripture Jesus is asked that question by Peter and he responds with a parable. Remember last week, when Jesus was accused by the pastors in his town of spending too much time with sinners and he responds to that accusation with the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, or as we know them in this church as the parables of the found sheep, the found coin, and the loving father, so today this parable is a response to a question on forgiveness.

It is a parable about judgment day. The king is looking to get back what people owe him and this one person owes him what would be in today's terms over a trillion dollars. He decides to sell the person and his family but the person pleads with him and says in vs.26 "have patience with me and I will pay you everything." As a result the king has pity on him and completely forgives his debt, he now no longer owes anything. From a trillion dollars to zero, nothing.

This person who was just forgiven then goes out and hunts down a person who owes him about \$2,000, grabs him by the neck and requires that he be paid back. This person responds and says: "have patience with me and I will pay you everything." But the one who was just forgiven a trillion dollars refuses to listen and throws him into prison. The king catches wind of it and as a result of the one who refused to forgive the others debt right after he had been completely forgiven, tortures him for all eternity. Great stories this Sunday, right?

This parable is not one of those that you come away with and Jesus says go and do likewise, it is a story that has a moral at the end, and the moral is just as the King of Kings has forgiven you, wiped out your debt of a trillion sins, so you must forgive those who have sinned

against you, even though their sin is not even close to the magnitude that our sin was against God. Forgiveness is the antonym or the opposite of revenge. This term 70x7 is used in the Old Testament in Genesis 4:24 “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold”. Meaning that he would completely and eternally be avenged.

So Jesus responds to Peter and says you always have to forgive, revenge has not part of me and of those who follow me. We are called to renounce every human intention of getting even with someone. Now unlimited forgiveness is not sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior. A loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so that they can regain trust. Not exactly what Elisha did with the boys. Certainly do not go and do likewise with that story.

Peter thought he was doing pretty well with the 7 times, but Jesus’ response and his parable alludes to no limits to the willingness to forgive. If you want mercy from God, be merciful to others. If you require justice from others in revenge, expect the same from God. This parable roots reconciliation and forgiveness of sins in God’s mercy and then reveals the foolishness of those who try to set limits on their willingness to forgive others.

As we step away today we must ask the question of what are the limits to our forgiveness of others? What sets us off to send bears to maul our opponents? This would be what would prevent us from being followers of Christ. May God give us the strength to forgive as we are forgiven, Amen.