

We Need to Forgive
Pentecost 15
September 12, 13, 2020
Prince of Peace, Topeka

Do you ever find yourself in a conflict with anyone? Chances are you do; unless you never have anything to do with anyone. It seems people live with more conflict than we used to.

I have noticed that one of the largest lock advertisers on TV are Lawyers. If you have been in an automobile accident call 1-800-Some Lawyers Name and get what you are owed. If you have taken this drug or have owned this product call 1-800-Some Lawyers Name, and they will get you money. When I worked full time for the hospital, I was surprised by the number of families who wanted the Yellow Pages so they could call a Lawyer, even before they found out how badly their loved one had been injured in a car wreck.

Of course, our sense of getting what is owed us isn't caused nor is it always dependent upon involving a Lawyer. When our neighbor backs into our mailbox, we expect him to fix it or get it fixed. At work we expect our workers to work for their money or we expect that we get money for our work.

Some of our most contentious conflicts are between members of the same family. How many families suffer permanent splits over how an estate is divided or how one family did more than another family member and they don't think it is fair.

We even have these kinds of conflicts in the church. In the 18 years I worked for the Kansas District, I have found myself represented, in one fashion or another by 7 different Lawyers. Upon advice of council I can't even tell you what that representation was about. Though I can assure you that I didn't do anything wrong – at least in my opinion (and for the record, in the opinion of the court) I didn't do anything wrong.

I know that at Prince of Peace there has been a history of conflicts. Sides have formed. Opinions were solidified. And some people got their way and other people walked away. To make matters worse, some people didn't just walk away from Prince of Peace, they walked away from church and sometimes God as well.

This is not the way Jesus would have us be church. Peter asked Jesus, "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times?" The scriptures in other places have even multiplied 70 times 7. But Jesus was talking more than 7 or 77 or even 490 times. He was saying we keep forgiving forever. That is what the numbers 7 and 70 meant when Jesus said it. That is what Peter heard. Whenever we are wronged against, we are always to forgive.

I bet Peter said, at least to himself, "but that isn't fair." That is what I would say, if Jesus reminded me to this verse after someone had wronged me. Isn't that what you would say? It isn't fair.

So, Jesus told a parable and the parable really shows just how unfair Jesus was talking about. A servant was forgiven a large debt but when it came to forgiving even a small debt he said, "Pay what you owe." When the Master heard about it, he threw the servant into prison. Jesus summary was, "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Perhaps we should read those words at every church meeting, before every family gathering, and whenever we think we have not received what is owed us. Sometimes it isn't fair, but do we really want God to be fair?

Had God been fair, when the first family conflict occurred, with the first family in the Garden – I think God could have fairly washed his hands of us all. He could have cast Adam and Eve and all of us who are their descendants out of the Garden – God could have walked away from the whole sorry mess.

Even, at the moment of that first conflict – God had mercy. Even, in the midst of announcing the consequence of human sin, God also announced the plan by which he would save human beings from sin – from our conflicts with him and our conflicts with one another.

So, Jesus came into the world, not to treat us fairly, but to show us mercy. He became sin in our place. He went to the cross to pay the full and complete penalty for our sin. He was buried in a tomb to complete his human existence. He was raised from that tomb to demonstrate how we will all be raised from our tombs, not because it is fair – it isn't fair at all. Fair would be leaving us to rot in our tombs. Because God has mercy on us and loves us, he has shown us mercy by forgiving us all our sins and will show us mercy on the day of our resurrection by bringing us all into his presence forever. That isn't fair. That is the gift God gives to us.

As God's children, we have fought with one another since Adam and Eve. The first brothers even ended their conflict by murder. Not much has improved since that first family. We still experience conflict with one another. And too often our most extreme conflicts occur with those who are closest to us, families and our church families. Jesus has taught us that when our brother and sister, by birth or in Jesus, sin against us that we are always to forgive them.

I know this sounds like more law. And there is a law side to this. God expects his children to be as forgiving as he has been. But I also now that we NEED to forgive. Not just to fulfill the law, but because a lack of forgiveness brings heartache to our lives.

My own father had what was nearly a lifelong conflict with his sister. For nearly 50 years they didn't speak to one another. My father thought he had been wronged, but the thing that was wrong was the division it caused for our whole family. What was wrong was the pain my own father experienced because he could not forgive.

In the last couple of years of my Dad's life, he was blessed with dementia. It was a selective dementia. Dad forgot every bad thing that had ever happened to him. For two years, every week, my Dad and his sister met for 2 hours and would laugh and celebrate all the good things they both remembered.

We need forgiveness not just to fulfill God's law. We need to forgive because a lack of forgiveness is a greater burden than guilt has ever been. We need God's forgiveness because guilt is a burden and God has provided that forgiveness. We need to be forgiven when we wrong a brother or sister, because the guilt we carry for our wrongs is a heavy burden to carry. But we also need to forgive, because when we fail to do so, it is as though we are thrown into jail to pay the debt ourselves. Amen.