

# FORGIVENESS AT THE BEACH

John 21:1-19

## The Third Sunday of Easter

The hardest thing for us to do is to forgive someone. Forgiving someone is not a natural act for us. It is not natural because forgiveness takes precedence over my need to be right, my need to be justified, and my need to get even. Forgiveness declares that restoration of a broken relationship is more important than determining who is right and who is wrong. Forgiveness is the hardest heart work we ever do. Real forgiveness is not about battling with another person until everything is worked out, but battling an ego within which demands to be seated at the center of your life. It is hard work.

Jesus makes it look easy. On the cross He looked at His tormentors and said,

*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.* (Luke 23:34)

On the second Sunday after the Resurrection Jesus returns to the Upper Room to see Thomas who missed the meeting the first week and who had declared,

*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.* (John 20:25)

Still, Jesus comes that second Sunday looking for Thomas.

Our text for the day has a multi tiered story that might add to the misconception that forgiveness is easy. After seeing Jesus in resurrected form, seven of the disciples return to their fishing nets. Once again we catch this picture of Jesus coming to them. It surely must have seemed unbelievable to Him that His disciples would return to their old fishing business, but still it was true. When He saw them from the beach he called out to them telling them to fish on the other side of the boat and then while they caught a net breaking load of fish, He started a charcoal fire and cooked some fish for their breakfast. When breakfast is done, He takes Simon Peter by the arm and leads him away from the others for a private conversation. With the smoke of the charcoal fire in the air, Jesus three times asked Peter the question,

*Do you love me?* (John 21:15ff)

The smoke smelled like the fire in Caiphas' courtyard. The gospel writer John uses the same word to describe that fire on the beach that he used to describe the one in the courtyard where Peter denied Jesus. The smell of that morning fire was a reminder of a painful moment in Peter's not so distant past. The three questions of Jesus brought to mind in a fresh way that awful memory of his three-fold denial of Jesus. But, Jesus was not there to drag Peter down into the mire of his past but to give him his future. Instead of berating him and asking him, "Why?" Jesus said to Peter,

*Feed my sheep.* (John 21:17)

Like the story of Jesus appearing to doubting Thomas in the Upper Room, this story about Jesus appearing to Peter on the beach sounds like a story of forgiveness more than anything else.

Of course, we err if we think it was an easy thing for Him. Being fully human meant that He was wounded in His heart when He was misunderstood, maligned, and betrayed. In Hebrews 4:15 we hear the Word of God saying about Jesus,

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are; yet, without sin.*

When the Bible talks about Him being tempted as we are tempted, it means that making the forgiveness choice was not easier for Him than it is for us.

Jesus certainly understood how hard it is to forgive, but He also understood the importance of forgiving. When He gave the disciples a model prayer to pray, He offered that prayer which begins with,

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name... (Mt. 6:9)*

and has within it,

*And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors... (Mt. 6:12)*

There is a divine connection between our willingness to forgive others and God forgiving us. There is no way to miss it. As a way of underscoring the importance of forgiving one another, He ended the prayer with a commentary elaborating only on that single part of what we know as "The Lord's Prayer." In that Word which follows the prayer, we hear Him saying,

*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. (Mt. 6:15)*

And in another place in scripture, the Words tells us what happens to the heart as an unforgiving spirit is allowed to live in us. In Galatians we read about the works of the flesh being things like,

*...enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy...*

A heart filled with an unforgiving spirit is a dangerous and harmful thing. It is like a poison in our soul destroying the good in the heart and, finally, it will separate us from God.

If we are nurturing a hurt, if we are possessed by a spirit of resentment and anger, if there is someone we need to forgive, there is nothing more important for us to do than the hard work of forgiveness. In "*You Were Born for This*, a book recently read and studied in a Sunday School group, Bruce Wilkerson creates an image of someone stepping on a piece of broken glass at the beach. The cut is ignored, the gash hurts, but remains ignored out

of a belief that it will heal in time. So, the wound gets infected, the foot swells, walking is difficult, you get a fever...At this point the author writes, *“You get the picture. If you treat the wound with care—wash out the dirt, protect it from germs—your foot will heal. However the wound happened, God made your body to heal itself. But if you leave the wound unclean and untreated, infection sets in. The healing process is blocked. God made our hearts the same way. When we forgive after we’ve been hurt, the wound gets cleaned out, and the healing process can start. When we don’t forgive, it’s as if we have chosen to leave dirt in the gash. Healing can’t happen...the more time that goes by, the more the destructive consequences spread.”*

What Wilkerson is telling us is that our hearts get wounded, too. If we do not treat that wound, our hearts become infected with a spiritual germ that will destroy the good we want to see present in our spirits and in our relationships with others. So, here is the question. Is your heart wounded? Has someone caused a pain which seems impossible to handle? Has someone caused a hurt which has been and is even now infecting your heart to the point that it is eating away the inner goodness within you, destroying your life, and taking away your joy? Is there someone you must forgive or run the risk of losing your own soul? As a way of caring for your wounded heart, I am inviting you to come to this altar this morning to ask God to forgive you for not offering forgiveness when it should have been offered a long time ago? When we refuse to forgive, it damages our relationship with God and we are choosing to live in our sin. As a way of caring for your wounded heart, I am inviting you to this altar of prayer this morning to tell God of your intention to restore a broken relationship that could be restored by an act of forgiveness. And finally, as a way of caring for your wounded heart, I invite you to rise from your prayers searching out those you need to forgive as well as those whom you need to ask to forgive you.

It is hard work. But, it is important work. Not to do it is choose to live with a damaged and wounded heart which will infect every part of your spirit. Not to do it is to put at risk your soul and your walk with God. Come now and pray and then go and be reconciled to our brother or sister who you need to forgive and who may need to forgive you.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on April 18, 2010.