

## Community: It Starts Here!

### Forgive One Another

Colossians 3:12-17

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If you like a thriving and fruitful garden, this past summer was not kind to you. Unless you watered a lot you probably had fewer blooms or fewer vegetables than usual. But do you know what grew really well in most gardens this summer? Weeds! Why is that? If you want a beautiful garden you've got to water it and fertilize it and tend it. But if you want weeds, you don't have to do anything. They grow and spread all by themselves. It's really pretty annoying.

As we continue our worship series on community, I want to work with that garden image as a metaphor as this week we talk about the power of forgiveness. To get into it, let's read today's scripture passage from Colossians 3:12-17...one of my favorite passages of scripture,

*Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.*

*Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

You know, scripture makes it clear that God cares deeply about healthy community, the kind of community where love flourishes. We were made for that kind of community. In this metaphor that I'm using, a healthy, lush, fruitful garden is that kind of

community. That's the goal. That is God's desire for us here at Prince of Peace and in our families, schools, neighborhoods, and places of work.

In the same way that weeds so easily pop up in our gardens if left untended, bitterness can take root in a community and grow an ugly crop of broken relationships if not dealt with. Jesus once said that where two or more are gathered, he is present. And while that's certainly true, I have found that it's also true that where two or three are gathered, there's going to be conflict. Someone is going to get their feelings hurt. Someone is going to get angry. That's a given in human community. It's what we do about it that matters. Left untended, our hurt feelings, bruised egos and wounded hearts become bitter roots that grow up into resentment and broken relationships that destroy community.

So what do you do when weeds grow up in your garden? No, you don't throw weed killer down. That's bad for the environment. Instead, you yank them out by the roots. And what does that look like in community? It looks like forgiveness. Saint Paul put it this way, *"Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others."* That wasn't a suggestion; it was a command. Why? Because Paul knew how important healthy community was to God, and how important it is to us, and what a powerful witness it is to the world.

I find that forgiveness is frequently misunderstood, and so years ago I created a little list to help provide some clarity on what forgiveness is from a faith perspective. I've shared it before, but it bears repeating:

- **Forgiving is not the same as forgetting.** Quite frankly, you and I don't have the capacity, the power to forget. We will probably always carry the scars of being wounded in relationships. But just because we remember doesn't mean we haven't forgiven.
- **Forgiving is not pretending that nothing happened.** It doesn't mean that we bury our head in the sand. Broken relationships need to be dealt with.
- **Forgiving does not mean you have to like the offender.** It doesn't mean you feel warm and fuzzy toward the person who hurt you. We can pray that the transforming power of God will enable us to love the offender, which is an act of our will, and not an emotion.

• **Forgiving is a matter of mercy, not justice.** Our forgiveness of someone is not dependent upon their worthiness to be forgiven, just as God's forgiveness of us is not dependent upon our worthiness. We're called to forgive even when the other person isn't worthy...or isn't even sorry for what they've done.

• **Forgiving does not mean the instant restoration of trust.** Trust has to be earned, and when you've been burned badly the relationship almost always has to start over again in terms of earning trust.

• **Forgiving is a process.** It's almost never a once-and-for-all thing. There are people you may need to forgive every day in order to keep your heart free and clean. And finally...

• **Forgiving is mostly a gift we give ourselves.** We are the ones who benefit most by practicing the grace of forgiveness because it sets us free from the soul cancer known as bitterness.

I love this quote from William P. Young's book, "The Shack." It sums up forgiveness so well. He writes:

*Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is about letting go of another person's throat.....Forgiveness does not create a relationship. Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their mind and behavior, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established.....Forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. But should they finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart that allows you to reach out and begin to build between you a bridge of reconciliation.....Forgiveness does not excuse anything.....You may have to declare your forgiveness a hundred times the first day and the second day, but the third day will be less and each day after, until one day you will realize that you have forgiven completely. And then one day you will pray for their wholeness.*

Forgiveness pulls bitterness up by the root, restoring community and making room for love to flourish. Healthy gardens need to be watered, fertilized, and tended to. So, what does that mean for a healthy community?

A well-watered community is one that tends to its own spiritual health. Regular worship in which we engage our whole heart and being. Daily time in Scripture to nourish our soul. Sabbath rest to restore us. All those habits we talked about in September. Last summer's drought wreaked havoc on our gardens. It provided

the perfect environment for weeds to grow and take over. And the same is true in community. A dry soul is easily offended and clings to resentment. We can't make it rain, but we can be sure that our souls are well-watered.

In addition to water, a healthy garden thrives with some good organic fertilizer. What does that look like in community? Today's scripture reading gives us great guidance here when it says, "*Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*" Tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... these things fertilize community when applied liberally to our relationships. And we can afford to apply them liberally because they have been liberally applied to our lives by the One who chose us, loves us, and lives within us through the Holy Spirit.

A few years ago we shared this amazing story of forgiveness that took place in North Minneapolis. And while we don't normally like to repeat things, this story is worth hearing again. Watch this (video)

Isn't that incredible? You know, Mary's forgiveness didn't just set Oshea free. More importantly, perhaps, it set her free. That's the power of forgiveness. It is the power to heal broken relationships and create the kind of community that reflects Jesus' love for the world.

In these days when we seem so divided as a nation, when simple issues become reason to argue and end relationships, we need not only to hear what God is saying to us today, but live into it. We can point fingers at others and judge them and blame them for the way they think or act or the things they say, but we can't change others. We can only change ourselves with the Spirit's help.

So, where in your life has bitterness taken root and grown into a weed of resentment? Honestly, can you think of at least one person who somehow wounded your heart and against whom you're holding a grudge? Jesus is calling you to let it go.

So try this. Close your eyes. Now bring to mind that person you're struggling to forgive. That person against whom you're holding a grudge. Now, clench your fists just as tightly as you can. Squeeze them, hold them tight, feel that tension. And now open your hands and release that tension. Do you feel that? That's what forgiveness does. It releases us. It sets us free.

Let me encourage you to do two things this week. First,

ask yourself, “How can I make sure my soul is well-watered? How can I better nurture my soul?” Tend first to your own soul, allowing God to heal your wounded heart and fill it with the supernatural love of God. Then second, pray. Pray for that person who wounded you. Be persistent in prayer and see how prayer changes hearts and opens doors.

I want to leave you with this quote from a spiritual leader named Lori Deschene. Let these words speak to you:

*Be the person who breaks the cycle. If you were judged, choose understanding. If you were rejected, choose acceptance. If you were shamed, choose compassion. Be the person you needed when you were hurting, not the person who hurt you. Vow to be better than what broke you – to heal instead of becoming bitter so you can act from your heart, not your pain.*

– Lori Deschene