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Speak...Forgiveness

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Role models...we all have them. Whether we know it or not. And we are role models as well...even if we know it or not. I can remember the first time I heard my kids saying the same words I would say in a particular situation with the same tone of voice. And it wasn't always good. But role models are important. We learn all kinds of things from them, but one of the hardest things for us to learn is how to forgive.

There are lots of studies and books on this and while I am no psychologist there is one book of stories that I am familiar with that deals with forgiveness. The bible. And while there are lots and lots of verses in the bible about the importance of forgiveness...why it matters to our health and our community, there are only a few actual role models. God – of course, but God's wrath in other verses can muddy the waters a bit.

We get absolute clarity about forgiveness from Jesus as he teaches extensively on this through His life, His own words and actions, and through the stories – the parables – He tells. The apostle Paul in his letters gives clear teaching as well on forgiveness. But actual stories of regular folks forgiving regular folks in the bible are few. But these few are incredibly powerful. I've pulled out three for us and they hit most the forgiveness buttons, but they are not easy.

However, I want to preface this whole topic of forgiveness with these words... if you are in the midst of an abusive situation, you are being bullied in person, online, you are experiencing sexual, physical, emotional abuse... any kind of abuse... you need to tell someone. In those situations, the word is not to simply forgive and stay in that situation. I hope you can get to a place where you can speak forgiveness down the road... that's a gift of healing for yourself... but in the here and the now we need to get you help...and out of the unhealthy situation.

Speak forgiveness... let's start with maybe the hardest one. Forgiveness in real time.

The story of Stephen. The resurrected Jesus has left the disciples to the work of building of the church... guided by the holy spirit they add to their number

and one of them was Stephen. Stephen was a passionate teacher about Jesus and so was arrested for incitement and brought to the authorities. Acts 7 has Stephen engaging his accusers with a long teaching about God, Jesus and the way things were going to be moving forward... and was stoned for it. That was his sentence... death by stoning. But during his stoning – in the midst of people throwing huge rocks at him... Stephen says... "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Echoing the role modeling that Jesus did on the cross, right? In Luke – who also wrote Acts and story of Stephen... Jesus said "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.*" Luke is showing us... see, Jesus did it so you can too... I'm just not so sure that anyone of us, in the midst of a physical stoning would have the ability to collect our thoughts in that way. But people throw stones at us all the time. By what they say about us... Sticks and stones may break our bones but words will never hurt... eh... not the most accurate phrase. How do we speak forgiveness while someone is throwing stones at us?

This week I heard a story. In the NBA and the machinery of the press, lots of things get said... printed... about people... it's become an obsession... and a multi-billion dollar business. So, I heard this week a story about one NBA player from one team who wrote a tell all book and talked about another player from another team... and it wasn't nice. The press interviewed the player who having stones thrown at him about it. His simple words were... well, God Bless him... God Bless him.

To speak forgiveness in the midst of someone throwing stones at you is hard because the temptation is to throw stones back... but to flip the whole thing around is a Stephen move... it's an unwillingness to absorb those hits into our soul our spirit... it's a refusal to be a victim... to be able to speak forgiveness... to ask God's blessing on a stone thrower is to know the power of God's blessing in your own life. You are not a victim... God has blessed you and called you... named you... you are not the child of a stone thrower. You are a Child of God. Act like it.

Speak forgiveness... let's move to the second story – which also may be the hardest one.

It's the story of Joseph and his brothers. It's the story we looked into last week. The story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers... who Judah represents with Judah's act and words of repentance. Joseph and his brothers never, ever expected to see each other again. Never in a million years. And when Judah repents, he doesn't know that his repentance for being a slaver – selling his own family... would be heard by the very guy who Judah needed to say it too. Remember repentance is powerful on its own and does not come with a guarantee of forgiveness.

Now Joseph has a choice... we don't know if Joseph, in all the years between, ever forgave, but we do know that when he sees his brothers again those old feelings of resentment, anger and bitterness returned because Joseph puts his brothers to a test, but with Judah's repentance it moves Joseph to forgiveness. Joseph is even able to reflect on the whole circumstance and come to the conclusion that yes, the brothers did a terrible thing, causing great harm, but God has used it for good as now Joseph is able to provide for his family... his father Jacob... his mom Rachel and his little brother Benjamin.

His brothers suspect that the forgiveness is conditional to their father and as their father approaches death they reach out to Joseph for assurances of their safety and Joseph responds kindly to them not once but twice. Joseph has made a choice to forgive... and that choice was not conditioned.

To speak forgiveness is to move on. I don't think the brothers were probably able to move on but that was their burden to bear not Joseph's. And this is what forgiveness does, frees you from the unforgiving burden. The burden of retribution. The burden of revenge. The burden of anger. The burden of a thorn in your side that won't ever heal. To speak forgiveness, frees you.

Now for the last story. And maybe the hardest one as well.

We are going to go back in history just one generation from Joseph and his brothers and look at their dad and uncle. Jacob their dad and Esau their uncle. Lots and lots of drama in this family. As we heard last week... Jacob the younger son first

get's Esau's birthright – Esau isn't concerned about that kind of thing until... well, until he was... and then Jacob get's Esau's blessing.

Jacob was a bad, bad boy. Encouraged and helped by his mom... which is a whole other story... have I said there is lots of drama in this family? As the story goes... Esau was not someone you should mess with, especially not Jacob. Imagine Sabretooth – Wolverine's brother in the Marvel comics as Esau and pee wee Herman as Jacob. It's not going to go well. So Jacob runs and he runs for 20 years and in the mean time we hear all about Jacob and nothing about Esau, only that Esau goes and marries the daughter of – who – Ishmael... remember the Ishmaelites the people who Joseph's brothers sold him too.

Crazy... anyway... Jacob decides that he wants to return home, but he knows that he is going to run into Esau. So, he sends a message to Esau, trying to break the ice and a report comes back that yes, the ice is broken and Esau is coming to meet Jacob and his bringing 400 men with him. Oh-oh. This throws Jacob into despair... he sends Esau lavish gifts and thinks about running again, but God finally takes ahold of Jacob, shakes him around a bit and says get a grip man... in the morning... here comes Esau... with the 400... what does Jacob do... still scared of Esau he sends out his servants and their kids first... then his least favorite wife Leah and their kids... and then in back hiding behind all of that he places his favorite wife and favorite son Joseph... no wonder the other brothers didn't like Joseph... but Jacob goes first – bowing 7 times as he approaches Esau.

But Esau runs to him... they hug and tears flow as these two long lost brothers are reunited. Esau immediately asks about Jacob's family and then says... hey, by the way... why all the lavish gifts? Esau says... keep the gifts... don't need them... just happy to have my brother back. It's clear in this case that Esau does not need evidence of repentance as did Joseph will later. There is no test for Jacob... no bitterness... no resentment... just love... as Esau has forgiven Jacob a long, long time ago.

Jacob was holding on to his deeds... not Esau... and while Esau moves to the sidelines of this long family story... Esau's example of forgiveness is

powerful. Esau moved on... we don't know how much time it took, but it is clear that there was nothing that Jacob or anyone else needed to do. Esau had let it go and it freed him to lead a whole new people with lands and a blessing of his own.

That what forgiveness does for us... it helps us be a blessing to others. Forgiveness helps us see ourselves as new with new possibilities... not tied down to some past event. Forgiveness is a resurrection event in our lives... a resurrection event that defeats the death of a past deed... a resurrection event that shapes us for a future filled with hope.

Three stories of people who were able to speak forgiveness – where do you need to speak forgiveness? Do you need to be reminded that you are Child of God, sure there will be stone throwers... they come and go... But remember who you are... and as a child of God you are not meant to carry the burden of retribution or revenge, that stuff that eats you up inside... that poisons other relationships... because when you speak forgiveness, you live resurrection.