

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**July 27, 2008**  
***Walk This Way: Resent or Release***  
**Luke 17:1-6**

NRS Luke 17:1 *Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2 It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4 And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."* 5 *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*

It is amazing what you will do when you really want something. Last night, we were all at home, and not too long before Amy and I would be getting ready for sleep, I decided I wanted something sweet to eat. In spite of going to the grocery store earlier that day, there was nothing much in the pantry or the fridge. We decided - all four of us I might add - to pile in the car and Clark drove us to the nearest grocery store, where we bought several containers of *Ben & Jerry's* ice cream (I highly recommend their cinnamon bun flavor). I know we looked like a site. Nearly 9:00 p.m., and dressed in grubby, weekend, yard-working clothes, we roamed the ice cream aisles and picked out our flavors. It is amazing what you will do when you really want something.

Do you really want to follow Jesus, and if so, how far will you go? Jesus said to some fishermen long ago: *follow me*. Over the course of time, this call has been extended time and again, and you and I are here because we have heard the call, and we have or are responding. *Follow me*. Following Jesus implies, following Jesus for the long haul.

Eugene Peterson writes: "There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness...Religion in our time has been captured by the tourist mindset. Religion is understood as a visit to an attractive site to be made when we have adequate leisure." (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 16).

That is why I like to use the language of journey or pilgrimage, when speaking of our shared faith. Walking in the way of Jesus is not just about isolated, even random experiences. It is a journey through deserts and paradise, through valleys and mountain-tops. At times, it takes us across the plains of mediocrity, and at others, through the turbulence of storms.

When Peter, Andrew, and all the others began following Jesus, they had no idea where it would take them and what it would require of them. In our passage, we are not given the name of the first disciple that asked about forgiveness, but in Matthew, we learn his name is Peter. Apparently, Jesus and some of the disciples had returned from what we might describe as a spiritual high point, but along with the rugged terrain their moods were growing tense. This following Jesus is not all that easy. Furthermore, Jesus is speaking of persecution, betrayal, and sacrifice – in today's parlance, this would not be a good recruitment strategy. The atmosphere is growing tense as they draw closer to Jerusalem with each step.

Perhaps, Peter was pushed one time too many, and so, he asks the question that at some point is on everyone's mind when they commit to walking the way of Jesus: *Lord, how many times do I have to keep on forgiving this imbecile...*[my interpretation!].

Not a bad question. How many times do we have to forgive someone who has embarrassed us, made us angry or stupid or belittled or inferior or humiliated or betrayed? Is there another option? Is there a limit? In

Luke, the response is seven times a day, and in Matthew, it is seventy times seven. Either way, the implication is that there is not a limit and we do not have a choice.

Just consider some of the statements Jesus made about forgiveness:

Matthew 6:12 *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Matthew 18: 21 *Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

Mark 11:25 *"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."*

Luke 6:37 *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven..."*

Forgiveness is the mark of a Christian.

Scott Walker relates the story of an account of Christopher Columbus's discovery of what has been called the "New World." Of course, there was nothing new about this world. As the three small sailing ships approached the isles, the cross of Christ was prominently displayed on the canvas of those sails. Along the land, the inhabitants saw and were introduced to this prominent symbol of the Christian faith.

Columbus logged in his diary that his impression of the native "Indians," as they were called, was that they were friendly and hospitable. "In all the world," he wrote, "there can be no better or gentler people." Furthermore, it was his hope that they would all turn Christian and "turn to the Church so numerous a folk."

In a matter of days, however, the Spanish Christians caught one of the natives in an act of petty theft – some clothing had been cast aside and that native was wearing it. As an example to demonstrate the seriousness of the sin of stealing, the Indian was trussed up and his ears were cut off.

It was ironic, that the desire for the gospel of Jesus to be heard was deafened by a failure to love and forgive. The large, red prominent crosses symbolizing the faith were empty. (*Footsteps of the Fisherman*, p. 73)

We know too, that we can surround ourselves with the symbols of our faith: gather routinely in worship, use all the right words, and devote ourselves to scripture. Yet, if we do not forgive, our professions are empty.

Walking the way of Jesus includes, walking the way of forgiveness. It is our mark.

### **Forgiveness is the Practice of the Christian:**

Each day we have the opportunity to practice our faith by forgiving.

We have all in this life been wronged and hurt by the actions of others. A cutting remark, an embarrassing confrontation, a betrayal, an abuse – no one can escape passing through this life without bearing the scars inflicted by another.

I have many personal examples, some of which are quite frankly, too personal and inappropriate to share in public. I suspect the same for each of you. There is one incident that I can share with you, that I am still dealing with today. During my four years as a student at Shorter College, I fell in love with my school. When I graduated I was a newlywed, and along with Amy I headed to Southern Seminary, grateful for the academic and

spiritual preparation Shorter provided for me. Seven years after I graduated, I was deeply honored to be invited to serve as a trustee. Words still fail me in expressing all that this meant to me to give back to *my* school. A few years later, however, Shorter was the victim of the same kind of politics that ripped through the Southern Baptist Convention. A month after arriving to Augusta, I received a note thanking me for my service to the school, but that I was no longer welcome. You see, I have been the pastor of the wrong kind of churches and still do, according to some.

I have learned and I am learning still, however, that I cannot remain in my wounds.

Please understand this: for the Christian believer, forgiveness is not an option, it is rarely easy, it does not come natural, and it will be hard work.

Forgiveness is:

Complete. Forgiveness cannot be partial, piecemeal, or otherwise gingerly acted upon. R.T. Kendall writes that we have a choice: bitterness or peace. When you chose to withhold forgiveness, peace no longer is a choice. And by the way, the peace is better.

Continual (seventy-seven times). Forgiveness is not about forgetting – First, because it is impossible, short of amnesia. John Claypool says, it is like taking a shower each day, but each day he knows he is not finished once and for all with the dirt.

Forgiveness is about choosing to keep “no record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5).

Chronic. When the guilt, shame, and anger comes back (and many times it will) we own it and then disown it.

Remember how I began the sermon? How far will you go for something you really want? Well, how far will you go for the relationships in your life? For your family, for your friends, for fellow church members, or even people you work alongside? When our time on earth is over, our relationships are the only thing that has the capacity to endure.

Recently, I read an all too familiar story. His name was Al Thompson, and he was the kind of man that we would say had everything. He had a great marriage, two children, a good job and a nice house. He and his family were not only active in church but gave every appearance of a deep and growing faith.

One day, a phone call, a simple phone call, changed his world. It was from the hospital. A nurse said to him that his father was dead. Al had not seen his father for years, and so, a rush of bitterness came over him, as he remembered alcoholism, beatings, and a childhood of near poverty.

Al did not go to the hospital to sign for release of the body. He did not go to the funeral. He did go to the cemetery the day after his father’s burial. It was evening, near dark. He walked up to the fresh mound of newly turned dirt, and cursed it and his father with his tears. For a year he carried the burden – and brothers and sisters it is a burden – of anger he could not let go.

One weekend he attended a retreat with his church where they spoke of forgiveness – both giving it and receiving it. At the conclusion of the retreat, the leader handed them all a small cross and said something that really got to Al. “If you were the only person in the world and the worst sinner, the Lord still would have died on the cross for you.”

On Al’s way home from the retreat he stopped by the cemetery. He found where his father was buried, dug a hole, and put the cross in his grave. Al said “At last I was free.”

When we hold back our forgiveness, we are separated. Not only are we separated from the one who has hurt us, but we are separated from God. And when we hold back our forgiveness, not only are we separated, but

we are enslaved. We are defined by someone else's sin. Children, forgive your parents for whatever hurt they may have caused you. Be free. Parents, why not make a commitment on this day to do a better job raising your children. Forgive yourself and be free.