

Sermon: The Healing Power of Forgiveness 2:

Today we continue our August series of sermons on the subject of healing. Eileen began our series at the Family Service when she reminded us that healing involves the whole person - body, soul and spirit. To be really well involves physical, mental, emotional and also spiritual elements; and this is the way we see Jesus operating in His healing ministry in the Gospels - Jesus is not just removing symptoms of disease He is touching the whole person. The Jewish concept of healing is rooted in the word "shalom" which we often understand as meaning 'peace', but there is far more to the word than just 'peace'. Shalom means 'wholeness' - to experience 'shalom' is to be made complete, perfect and full - totally whole body, soul and spirit. Wholeness means we are in right relationship with God; with others; with ourselves; and with creation.

Last week Donald Reeves spoke about the healing work of reconciliation in the community in Kosovo, and I want to build on both Eileen's and Donald's talks, because today I want to look at one of the vital factors on that journey towards wholeness. I have called it the healing power of forgiveness. To be a forgiven person and to be a forgiving person has powerful effects upon our whole being and I want to demonstrate that by two stories from the Gospels, and one straight from the news this week. At the centre of our faith stands the Cross of Christ the ultimate symbol of total, unconditional forgiveness. We know and celebrate each week in the Eucharist the story of our forgiveness. I was amused once to see a series of photos taken deliberately to raise a smile. One was a picture of a sign outside a convent that said, 'Trespassers will be apprehended and prosecuted - signed The Sisters of Mercy'. Somehow we know that our experience of forgiveness is vital to our own ability to forgive others.

The first story of forgiveness can be found in all the synoptic Gospels and it is the story of Jesus healing the man who was paralysed. You may remember that Jesus is teaching in a house and the crowds are so full that there is no way in. And so the man's friends lower him through the roof of the house where Jesus is. If I were looking on I would think that obviously this man's primary need was to be physically healed. But instead of immediately commanding the man to be healed Jesus says, 'Son your sins are forgiven'. Before physical healing this man's most essential need was to know he was forgiven - that his relationship with God was restored. Warren Wiersbe a bible teacher writes, 'Forgiveness is the greatest miracle that Jesus ever performs. It meets the greatest need; it costs the greatest price; and it brings the greatest blessing and the most lasting results'. Notice Jesus calls him 'son' not friend or man. Jesus is letting him know that he is a child of God first and foremost - he is forgiven. After that, Jesus proceeded to heal him physically. What we celebrate this morning in this Eucharist is the fact that all of us, no matter what we have done, no matter how terrible we may consider our offences to be - as we repent, we are forgiven. The church is not a community of perfect people - it is a community of forgiven people. God has wiped out our debts at the Cross and released us from them completely. We are God's beloved children.

The second story of forgiveness occurs in John's gospel and it involves the woman at the well. This Samaritan woman came to the well in the heat of the day precisely because she wanted to avoid the other women of the town, as it was the women's job to fetch the water. She had led a colourful life, having had five husbands, and was now living with a man - no doubt she had known rejection, judgement and perhaps hatred from some. Jesus speaks with her and asks her for a drink which, given the fact that he is a man, a Jew, and a Rabbi is quite a remarkable experience for this woman. But as He talks and shares with her and gets beneath her evasion and hiding, she knows that He is offering her acceptance, forgiveness and a new start. What does she do? Go home and think about it all privately? Chat it over with her partner? No, John says she went straight into town and told the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he be the Messiah?' Forgiveness has brought her freedom from guilt, shame and rejection. She can face society again - she is spiritually, mentally and emotionally a new person and that affects the way she relates to others in her world! That is the power of forgiveness!

As we know the power of being forgiven we can become people who forgive - and we have seen this in a story that hit the news this week. It is the story of the remarkable graciousness of Vincent

Uzomah, the black Christian teacher who was stabbed in the stomach in his school form-room by a fourteen year old boy who hated him because he was a teacher, and he was black. The boy was sentenced this week to 11 years in detention, but Mr Uzomah said that he had forgiven his young attacker and had been praying for him. As he came out of the court Mr Uzomah immediately started by saying, 'Because I am a Christian...' and then went on to say how he had forgiven the boy. In other words he was saying, because I know I have been forgiven by God I have forgiven'. His young attacker has shown no remorse or repentance but Vincent Uzomah knows the vital power of forgiveness.

Not only do we experience freedom when we are forgiven - we experience freedom **when we forgive** those who have wronged us. In a recent programme on Radio 4 a lady survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp was being interviewed. She said at one point that she had forgiven her Nazi prison officer and the interviewer asked, 'Dose he deserve it?' She replied, 'No I deserve it - the victim has the right to be free - to be released from the daily burden of pain and anger.' Similarly yesterday on the radio following the VJ day remembrance in London a veteran survivor of the Burma conflict, where a quarter of the men died of starvation or exhaustion at the hands of the Japanese, was asked, 'What do you think the nation can take away from today?' The veteran's response was simply, 'Forgiveness and thankfulness'. "Canon Andrew White vicar of Baghdad writes, 'Forgiveness is the most important thing in life, since it is the only thing that can prevent the pain of the past from determining our future'.

Vincent Uzomah has spoken honestly about the pain and suffering his attacker has inflicted on him and he has allowed the perpetrator to face the justice system and be sentenced - forgiveness does not mean covering up wrongdoing or denying the pain, or indeed bypassing justice. It may take time to honestly forgive, but what it does mean is that in forgiving those who have wronged us we can walk free from the prison of bitterness. I'd like to close with a poem from a book called, 'The Book of Forgiving' by Desmond Tutu - I think it expresses perfectly the response of Vincent Uzomah and all of us when we walk into the freedom that comes from being a forgiven and forgiving person.

I will forgive you
The words are so small
But there is a universe hidden in them.
When I forgive you
All those cords of resentment, pain and sadness that had wrapped
themselves around my heart will be gone.
When I forgive you
You will no longer define me.
You measured me and assessed me and
decided that you could hurt me.
I didn't count
But I will forgive you
Because I do count
I do matter
I am bigger than the image you have of me
I am stronger
I am more beautiful
And I am infinitely more precious than you thought me.
I will forgive you
My forgiveness is not a gift that I am giving you
When I forgive you
My forgiveness will be a gift that gives itself to me.

