

Releasing the Captives
Part 2: Freed by the Power of Forgiveness
Text: John 13:34
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
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Two-year-old Sam was upset. His mother was very busy this one day and in the midst of multi-tasking she said something to Sam without really thinking. A few minutes later Sam came to his mother, trying to hold back his tears. “You hurt my feelings,” he said. Tears spilled out of his big brown eyes. Then he hugged his mother and crawled onto her lap. He continued to cry as they cuddled. His mother told him over and over again how sorry she was. After maybe ten minutes he was feeling better. He looked up at his mother with a smile and said, “That okay, Mommy, I still love you.” Then he ran off to play.

I suspect that we’ve all been in that scene. Maybe we’re the parent who needs to be forgiven, or maybe we’re the little kid who finds within him the power to forgive.

Forgiveness is indeed a powerful thing. It can break down the prison walls of sin. To be trapped in that prison is part of the human condition. At one time or another we are all trapped in it. As we’ve noted, that prison has four walls. The first wall is the sins which you have committed against others, the second wall is the sins that others have committed against you, the third wall is the sins of the world, and the fourth wall is the sin of your self-righteousness.

We talked about the first wall two weeks ago: the sins which you’ve committed against others. Each brick in that wall is something that you’ve done which has hurt another person or has otherwise estranged you from others. These are the things for which God has forgiven you. God, through God’s incredible graciousness, has forgiven you! It’s like the old hymn says: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” You are forgiven. And the prison wall comes tumbling down.

The second wall is the sins that others have committed against you. That is a *huge* wall. There are a whole lot of bricks. And some of them represent things that actually happened! That is to say, sometimes we *imagine* things to be sins or slights against us which were never intended to be. But we experienced them that way and it still hurt. At other times people really *have* intended to hurt us. Big time. Like I said, that wall is huge.

There’s only one person in the world who has the power to tear down that wall: *you*. You have the power to forgive. By the grace of God, you have the power to forgive. God’s grace not only forgives our sins; God’s grace grants us the power to forgive those who have sinned against us. That second wall may’ve been built through no fault of your own. But you have the responsibility to do something about it because only you have the *power* to do something about it. The hurt and the pain caused by the sinful things that others have done against you can only be erased when you draw upon the power which God has given you to forgive.

Forgiving others is a crucial part of *loving* others. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another” (John 13:34). Perhaps it sounds a bit strange that we are *commanded* to love one another. But in fact we *do* have to be so commanded, especially when we’ve been hurt, because in the wake of such pain the temptation is to withdraw from others and wallow in self-pity. There’s nothing loving about that because love has to do with reaching out to others and being drawn into community with others. And sometimes we have to be *commanded* to do that; sometimes we have to *force* ourselves to do that. You see, love is not so much a noun as it is a verb; love is not so much a feeling as it is an action. And one of the principle actions of love is forgiveness.

It’s not an easy thing to do. It is so tempting to just hang on to the past and to cling to all of the pain of the past. In fact, we humans seem to take a peculiar pleasure in doing so. But that pleasure only serves to make the prison walls that much stronger.

We hang on to the pain of the past. You do it, I do it, we all do it. We hang on to the past sins that have been committed against us, and each year that list just gets longer. I mean, I have a *long* list of people whom I need to forgive. It includes all of the kids who bullied me in public school, and my Grade 5 teacher, and the New York Yankees.

It’s been said that anyone who grew up in the 1950’s and early ‘60’s in a baseball city other than New York hated the Yankees. It’s true. From 1947 through 1964 the Yankees won the American League pennant almost every year; 15 out of those 18 seasons they won the pennant. *And*, most of those years, they won the World Series too. My Chicago White Sox often finished second or third behind New York so yes, I hated the Yankees. Still do.

I don’t know how many times I’ve read the story of the 1952 World Series – which the Yankees won – and every time I read it again I think that somehow *this* time the Brooklyn Dodgers are going to win. This time Billy Martin will drop Jackie Robinson’s pop-up in Game 7, and those two runs will score, and the Dodgers will win the game and the Series.

I need to forgive the New York Yankees. I need to forgive *all* those who have hurt me; all those who have committed sins against me; both the real ones and the imagined ones. I need to forgive them all. And so do you. Because until you forgive them – until you let go of all of that pain – you continue to give power to all of those people who have hurt you. Until you forgive them, you remain trapped in the prison of sin. Others may have built the wall that entraps you. Others may have even installed the lock and hidden the key. They have imposed their power upon you. But you continue to empower them – you continue to *allow* them to have power over you – so long as you fail to forgive. And you’ll never know the fullness of life – you’ll never know the power of the abundant life which Jesus has promised us – *unless* you forgive them. It’s the only way to break out of that prison and be the person whom God created you to be. It’s the only way to be fully alive.

It's been said that forgiveness is not only a theological principle, it's a practical necessity. I mean, think about the pain that we cause ourselves when we fail to forgive. We hold all of that pain inside of us. We hide our feelings. We avoid the folks who've hurt us. Indeed, sometimes we want to *hurt* the folks who've have hurt us. When we are unable to forgive freely and fully, we are unable to get on with our lives. We are trapped in that prison of sin.

We could all learn a lesson from little Sam. Indeed, much of what I'm saying now draws upon the thoughts of Sam's mother as she reflected on that incident with her son. You see, Sam took the initiative to confront his mother with what she had said. Instead of holding her at arms length until she apologized, he crawled right up into her lap. Instead of ignoring or avoiding her, he hugged her. Instead of holding in his feelings, he cried. And when he felt that his anger had been heard, he was able to forgive and go on with his life. [I am indebted for these reflections to the Rev. Helen Hempfling Enari and her devotional book, *Lessons from Little Ones.*]

You forgive, and the prison wall comes tumbling down.

John White had been clinging to life for days. The doctors said that he was brain dead. Only the life support equipment was keeping him alive. His family decided to pull the plug. So they gathered around his bed, and said their good-byes, and their pastor offered a prayer. But still John held on. Finally his wife of nearly 60 years asked everyone to leave the room. She said that she needed a few minutes alone with Dad. As soon as they left she said, "John, it's okay for you to go. I love you, and I forgive you." And then John died.

Such is the power of forgiveness. Such is the power of love.

We can't change the past. But we can forgive and let go of the past. And when we do, we unleash the power of love. The French philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said:

"The day will come when, after harnessing the either, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, human beings will have discovered fire."

It is with such love that we forgive those who have sinned against us. It is with such love that we will take a giant leap toward co-creating with God a new heaven and a new earth. We forgive, and the prison wall comes tumbling down. Amen.