

John Sampson
"First Steps"
Text: Mark 1:9 - 15
Preached at KVCC
July 22, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a subject that many of us have on our minds these days.

Forgiveness for others. Forgiveness for ourselves. Forgiveness in the face of the unforgivable.

There are so many facets to forgiveness.

Today I reflect on forgiveness because many of you asked that I do so. This morning we continue a sermon series that I am calling Extraordinary Time, which invites us to open our hearts and our minds and our eyes to the presence of God moving through the ordinariness of our lives. And I have invited the congregation, all of you, to offer subjects that you would like me to preach on. And you chose many subjects, but one of the most popular was forgiveness – in all of its complexity.

And I think that if there is any place we might be able to find God working in our day-to-day experience it is definitely in forgiveness.

I've been letting this reflection cook within me for several weeks because I didn't know what to say about it. What could I possibly

say about forgiveness that hasn't already been said? What could I possibly say that many of you have not already experienced in your own lives?

And I found that I had a problem even defining what I thought forgiveness means.

I had to stop and think.

And then an image resolved before me.

For me forgiveness is our human ability to let go of the hurt and pain that others inflict upon us, or that we inflict upon ourselves. It's not simply forgetfulness with which it is often joined – as in to forgive and forget. It is something different. I think forgiveness also contains an element of consciousness that we knowingly release the ways we have been wronged. That we look directly at what has

been done to us, perhaps what we have done to others, or to ourselves, and we let it go, knowing that we could demand justice, or retribution, or some other type of accounting that would diminish the other, and compensate ourselves. But we don't.

And I think that forgiveness, whether it is for something small and mundane like the way I stole a quarter from my sister when I was 5, or whether it is for something beyond our comprehension, something like Auschwitz, I think forgiveness is ultimately an act of love.

As I often say, here among us, love is a force of attraction that binds us together, that overcomes brokenness and separation.

Forgiveness is a part of love because it is a process that seeks to avoid the corrosion of our relationships, and repair the damage where it is done. And it does that by wiping away all of the

emotional, and physical, and spiritual debts that we are racking up with each other in the ordinariness of our lives.

Our reading today, from the gospel of Mark, tells us something very wise.

It tells us that forgiveness is not the first step along the journey of love.

There are other things that need to precede it.

There are other things we need to do to till the soil of forgiveness first, so that when we ask for it, or when it is asked of us, we will be able to meet that request with openness, and with a strategy that makes success in forgiving more achievable.

Remember when I said I didn't know what to share this week because it seems that everything about forgiveness has already been said? Well what I don't think is shared very often is an image of what precedes forgiveness, of what gets us ready to forgive.

So we go back. We rewind the tape.

We go back before the possibility of forgiveness to the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry.

We go back to when Jesus first takes the stage, and is introduced to all of us – to his neighbors, to his disciples, to us sitting here so many years later.

After Jesus is baptized, something very odd happens. He is driven into the desert and we're told that he is tempted by a being called Satan, and that he is sandwiched between the hungry and wild

beasts on one side, and ministered by God's messengers the angels on the other.

This story of the temptation of Jesus, is one of the archetypes of human experience. It tells us that Jesus, and all of us, are pulled between different choices each and every day.

Some of our choices have easy answers – even if they are a bit self centered.

I absolutely do want whipped cream on my milkshake.

Some of our choices are easy, and are made for the welfare of others in our lives.

I will not share something that my friend told me in confidence.

But other choices can be driven by our own ego and need, and have profoundly negative implications for all of those around us.

I just learned that Nixon colluded with portions of the Vietnamese government before his election to ensure that he would win the election, and become President of the United States. Out of his selfish desire for power, Nixon committed treason against the very nation he sought to serve, and allowed for a presidency whose crimes still haunt us today.

All humanity, from the least of us to the most powerful, stands between the ravenous beasts of our desire, and the angels that call us to life lived for the good of all. And sometimes we choose ourselves, don't we? Sometimes we ignore, or maybe can't even see, what our choices will do to our families, our children, or our neighbors near and far. Sometimes the choices we embrace lead to

the shattering of our relationships, and cast us, and others, into the deserts of isolation.

And it might be at this moment that we think our spiritual ancestors will tell us that we should seek forgiveness, or offer forgiveness for what we have done.

But they don't.

The people who wrote the book of Mark tell us that Jesus' first injunction to all who would follow him is not to forgive those who have given into the temptation of their own bottomless need, or their own blindness, but to repent in our own hearts and lives.

And what's more, Jesus invites every person he meets, without exception, without knowing their history, without knowing whether

they should forgive, or be forgiven, he invites them, he invites us, to repent.

This is the anthropology of Jesus. He sees humanity as fundamentally defined by its need for repentance, regardless of where we live, regardless of when we live.

To repent literally means to turn around, to take a different direction along the road of life. Where you were walking south, now you begin walking west. Where you used to steal quarters from your sister, you stop and maybe you even return them, or pay her back. Where the world allowed the furnaces of Auschwitz to run day and night, now there are international treaties and courts of law that operate to make sure such a thing never happens again.

Repentance for Jesus is not just words. It is healing action, an action of love. It is the proof that we can offer one another, or ourselves, that we are worthy of forgiveness.

And for Jesus it is the work of all people, of people like us, here this morning. It is a discipline where we look into ourselves, and we engage with what we see directly and honestly. We look out at our relationships and we see them as they truly are, with the slights and the brokenness, but also with the joy and the love. And then we turn, and we commit to travel a different path in our lives from the one we are currently walking along.

Where do you see the brokenness in your hearts this morning?

Where do you see within the relationships of your lives the need for healing?

Where might you be called to turn in a different direction within your own life and travel a different path?

Repentance is definitely about a change of action, but I also think it has a deeper and more profound inner effect. The reason I think Jesus first calls all of us to repentance, and only after to forgiveness, is that in the discipline of repentance we come to admit the ways we fail, and that we are fallible people. We come to recognize that we fall short, just like those we might demand forgiveness from. We come to admit that we are doing the best we can, and it still is not always enough.

And if we can see ourselves as broken, just as we see those who have harmed us in their brokenness, I think we can build a link and a bridge between each other. We can stop seeing those who have hurt us as Other, and in humility acknowledge how they are us. We can see our shared humanity.

This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. invites us to experience in the quotation we heard earlier.

King personally knew the hurtfulness and arbitrariness of racism in our nation. As a leader in the struggle for the rights of African Americans he could have demanded reparations from white Americans for his people. He could have demanded retribution from our racist institutions for those most hurt by them. But instead, he asked for insight – for himself, for African Americans, and for all Americans – to enable us to see that we all contain goodness and failure, that we all give into our selfish and tribal temptations, but that we also have the possibility of unity and communion. He could have fought against the white Other, but instead, he called us all to a repentance that reveals our common humanity as a precondition of forgiveness.

With this insight and this inner work of repentance, we develop within ourselves humility and offer our enemies humanity. It is this inner work, which allows us first to love, and only then to forgive.

Jesus calls all of us to repent. His voice comes from outside of us, and asks us to wake up and really look at ourselves, and begin to change our own assumptions, and mindsets, our own works of isolation and brokenness so that when we finally get to the point of asking for forgiveness from another, or requesting forgiveness from someone who has hurt us, we will be able to enter the sacred space of forgiveness not as adversaries, but as children of God – united and uniting in a Spirit of Love.

So let us begin, let us take our first steps. Let us start at repentance and let us not stop until we are welcomed into the valley of forgiveness. And know that God is on this journey with us, because it is a journey of love. Amen.