

KICKING SAND: Fun in the Son
Message for August 12, 2018
North East United Methodist Church
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“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

-Matthew 18: 23-35

I remember this advertisement in comic books when I was a kid:



There certainly a lot of people in the world that seem to “*kick sand*.” A lot of people who cause hurt and pain. Often, we want to, like Mac in the advertisement, “*kick sand*” back.

That is the challenge we face as Christians, the challenge that exists between what we want to do and what Christ calls us to do. This is the endless battle that holds every one of us, but not everyone succumbs to their initial reaction when hatred “*kicks sand*” in their face. What makes the difference?

Knowing. Knowing makes the difference.

Leonard Griffith tells the following story. On the evening of April 25, 1958, a young Korean exchange student, a leader in student Christian affairs in the University of Pennsylvania, left his apartment and went to the corner to mail a letter to his parents. Turning from the mailbox he stepped into the path of eleven leather-jacketed teenage boys. Without a word they attacked him, beating him with a blackjack, a lead pipe, and with their shoes and fists.

Later, when the police found him in the gutter, he was dead. All Philadelphia cried out in vengeance. The district attorney secured legal

authority to try the boys as adults so that those found guilty could be given the death penalty. Then a letter arrived from Korea that made everyone stop and think. It was signed by the parents and by twenty other relatives of the murdered boy. It read in part:

“Our family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action...In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance for the boys when they are released...We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins.”

John Ortberg writes, *“As an adult, Jesus would give himself to all people, and to twelve friends in particular. One of them would betray him, another would deny him, all would abandon him. On the cross, the entire weight of the unpayable debt owed by sinful humanity would fall on him. He would pay it all. **This is why the cross is at the heart of Christianity. It shows us the heart of God. Jesus feels compassion, his eyes fill with tears, his lips tremble a little out of love for his children. He chooses to pay the debt we never could. He longs to forgive. And what Jesus does at infinite cost, he invites us to do as well, though at much lesser expense.**”*

The Amish understand Jesus’ invitation. In October 2006, Charles Roberts walked into the Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania and killed five young girls.



The world was shocked as the Amish community reached out, not only to each other and the families of the victims, but also reached out to Robert's family.

On the very night of the murders, an Amish neighbor of Robert's family went to the family and offered them forgiveness. Speaking of the Robert's family, Daniel Esh, an Amish woodworker with three grandnephews inside the school during the attack, said, *"I hope they stay around here and they'll have a lot of friends and a lot of support."*

The Amish verbally expressed their forgiveness to the memory of the killer. They refused to talk badly about him or degrade his character. They reached out to his family as fellow victims; they wanted to extend compassion to his family. Half of the people who attended his funeral were Amish. The Amish also designated a portion of the fund that poured in from around the world for the Amish schoolgirls to the widow and the children of the shooter.

What makes the difference? Knowing makes the difference. Knowing the depths Jesus went in order to forgive you.

As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:13, ***"...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if any man has a complaint against any; even as Christ forgave, so you also do."***

Ephesians 4:32 – ***"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you."***

The Amish summed up in one sentence Paul's teachings and Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, ***"If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you...[how] can you not forgive other people?"***

This is what Jesus teaches Peter. Before Jesus shares today's parable of a King who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants, and the servant, who after being forgiven his debt, refused to forgive his fellow servant, Peter comes to Jesus and asks, ***"Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"*** (Matthew 18:21).

Peter is upset. Someone has hurt him and he has come to Jesus and asked the question that so many of us have asked at one time or another in our

lives, “*Why should I forgive? Why should I always have to be the one to forgive?*”

Jesus responds to Peter’s question, “***No, not seven times...but seventy times seven***” (Matthew 18:22).



What is Jesus saying?

What Jesus is doing is reversing the Law of Lamach found back in Genesis 4:23-24. Lamach vows that anyone who attacks him, harms him, will be punished seventy-seven times. Lamach is saying there will be vengeance.

Jesus makes the point that there are two ways to live with hurt. There is the way of vengeance and the way of forgiveness. The first leads to death, and the second leads to life. Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive.



Just in case Peter doesn’t get it, Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

The debtor had been forgiven his debt by the King, forgiven an unbelievable debt, and refuses to forgive his fellow man. He refuses to forgive a debt of

just a few dollars. The King replies, ***“Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?”***

Again, as one Amish neighbor said to reporters, *“If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you ... [how] can you not forgive other people?”*

Ortberg writes, *“Human beings have a tendency to think they can receive forgiveness from God without having to forgive others. In telling the story, Jesus doesn’t say that this is a bad idea; he calls it impossible. This is why Jesus says elsewhere that we are to pray, ‘Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us.’”*

“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

-Dorothy Day

Ortberg goes on to write, *“True forgiveness is never cheap. Hurt is deep; hurt is unfair. You want the offenders to know the pain they have inflicted on you. You want them to get paid back. **In fact, only one thing I know costs more than forgiving someone. Know what it is? Not forgiving them. Non-forgiveness costs your heart. You start out holding a grudge, but in the end the grudge holds you. Jesus said that the unforgiving employee ended up in prison. I think that, spiritually speaking, the prison term for non-forgivers begins on earth. Bitterness and coldness of heart are far stronger than any iron bars.**”*

Michael Williams shares the following illustration, *“In his book, Lee: The Last Years, Charles Bracelen Flood reports that after the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, ‘Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it.’”*

Williams goes on to write, ***“It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain, let bitterness take root and poison the rest of our life.”***

Don’t forgive, and your anger will become your burden.

Don’t forgive, and bit by bit all the joy will be choked out of you.

Don’t forgive, and you will be unable to trust anybody, ever again.

Don't forgive, and the bitterness will crowd compassion out of your heart.
 Don't forgive, and that little grudge you nurse will grow larger and stronger.
 Don't forgive, and you will kill any hope of relationship.
 You will kill community.

When we forgive and don't "*kick sand*," we relieve ourselves of the burden of anger and bitterness, and free our heart to love and be open to Christ and His blessings. But that is not the reason we forgive.

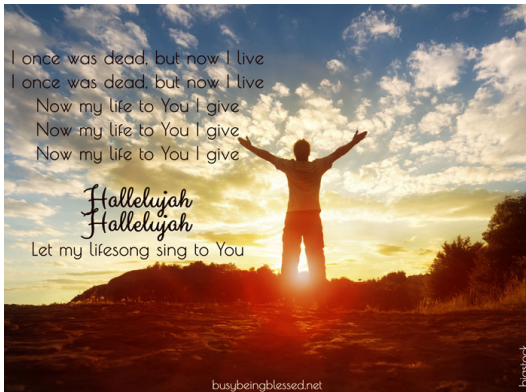
The reason we forgive is as Paul writes in, 2 Corinthians 5:14, "***Christ's love compels us.***"

The word compels literally means "*leaves me no choice.*" Paul is saying, "*I have no choice but to respond to Christ with my whole being. After what Christ has done for me, shown me in His act of sacrificial love, how can I not forgive, how can I not serve, how can I not worship, how can I not act.*"

I remember several years ago, speaking at Camp Pecometh. God moved in a mighty and unmistakable way. Because of lightening off in the distance, the Galilean service, a culminating service for the week was held inside instead of at the outdoor chapel. I spoke to the youth about the themes we had discussed in Bible study throughout the week, how we are called to show gratitude, hospitality, generosity, and how we are called to live a life of worship, doing everything, every action, every task, as if we were doing it for God. I spoke about how our showing gratitude, hospitality, and generosity each day was our act of worship, and how church was a very small piece of the puzzle, a very small piece.

As Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, "***And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.***" Our worship is every action, every thought, every word, every day.

I then spoke to the youth about why we give ourselves as a "*living sacrifice*," why we attempt to live a life of worship.



As Casting Crowns sing, why should we “*make our Lifesong sing*”? We “*make our Lifesong[s] sing*” because we have much to sing about.

“God has freely given us his Son: who has deserved or could ever deserve such a privilege.”

-Pope John Paul II

Because of all God has done for us, we offer God back a life of worship, a life of forgiveness, mercy, love, service, grace, gratitude. Because of all God has done for us, we refuse to give into our bitterness. We refuse to allow the world to mold us. We refuse to become the unforgiving servant in Jesus’ parable.

I love the story of Eddie Rickenbacher, a famous World War II pilot.



His plane, *The Flying Fortress*, went down in 1942 and no one thought he would be rescued. Perhaps you have read or heard how he and his eight passengers escaped death by climbing into two rafts for thirty days. They fought thirst, the sun, and sharks. Some of the sharks were nine feet long.

The boats were only eight feet long. But what nearly killed them was starvation. Their rations were gone within eight days and they didn't have anything left.

Rickenbacher wrote that even on those rafts, every day they would have a daily afternoon devotional and prayer time. One day after the devotional, Rickenbacher leaned back and put his hat over his eyes and tried to get some sleep. Within a few moments he felt something on his head. He knew in an instant that it was a seagull that had perched on his raft. But he knew that they were hundreds of miles out to sea. Where did this seagull come from? He was also certain that if he didn't get that seagull he would die. Soon all the others on the two boats noticed the seagull. No one spoke, no one moved. Rickenbacher quickly grabbed the seagull and with thanksgiving, they ate the flesh of the bird. They used the intestines for fish bait and survived.

Rickenbacher never forgot that visitor who came from a foreign place, that sacrificial guest.



Every week, Rickenbacher can be found, out on the pier near where he lives, with a bucket of shrimp, feeding the seagulls, allowing them to land on his shoulders, at his feet. He feeds them to say thank you, thank you, thank you.

Every time we serve...every time we show a stranger hospitality...every time we use our gifts, give of ourselves, to help others...every time we love our neighbor...every time we speak the name of Jesus to another...every time we forgive...we are saying to God, *"Thank you, Thank you, Thank you..."*

As Paul wrote, in Romans 12:1, ***"This is truly the way to worship Him."***

C.S. Lewis in his book, Mere Christianity, states the following on forgiveness, “*Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. ‘That sort of talk makes them sick,’ they say. And half of you already want to ask me, ‘I wonder how you’d feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?’*”

So do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you in this book what I could do—I can do precious little—I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.’ There is not slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are not two ways about it. What are we to do?

It is going to be hard enough, anyway, but I think there are two things we can do to make it easier. When you start mathematics, you do not begin with the calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want (but all depends on really wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one’s husband or wife, or parents or children, or the nearest N.C.O., for something they have done or said in the last week. That will probably keep us busy for the moment. And secondly, we might try to understand exactly what loving your neighbor as yourself means. I have to love him as I love myself. Well, how exactly do I love myself?”

What are some small steps you can take to begin to be a more forgiving person? Think of the last 24 hours. Has someone said something to you that has caused you pain or frustration? Have you harbored unforgiveness? Are you ready to forgive him or her? Are you ready to stop “kicking sand”?



Do not focus on what the other person has done. Focus on how much you have been forgiven, how much the Master, God Himself, through His Son, Jesus Christ, has forgiven you. Focus on how much God has blessed you, has loved you. Knowing the depths Christ went for you makes all the difference.

And then, in response to God's gift of forgiveness and grace, look across the table and forgive your neighbor and in so doing, in this beautiful act of worship, more powerful than any day in church, God will hear you saying in your actions, "*Thank you...Thank you...Thank you...*"