

WHY REPENT? WHY FORGIVE?

Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-14

"I can't do it, I just can't forgive them!" Everyone had found out by now that Ingrid's partner Brad had had an affair with her best friend Suzy. How could they have done this to her? How could they have betrayed her like that? How could they have humiliated her and pretended as if all was well? And to top it all off, when it was all found out, they justified it by saying that they were in love. "It just happened" was Brad's response. "I didn't mean it to happen but it just did. Suzy and I just fell in love. We never wanted to hurt you but we couldn't change what we felt about each other." Suzy's response to Ingrid was just silence. She avoided any contact and never returned her calls. Was that not an admission of guilt? Well, Ingrid would not let her off the hook!

And now, another friend, Sarah, was saying that Ingrid should consider forgiving Brad and Suzy? After what they had done to her? No way! And even though a part of Ingrid deep inside didn't want to hold on to it, even though a part of her knew that the right thing to do was just let it go and move on; she just found herself powerless to do so. She had much too much anger inside, much too much of a bitter feeling of hurt and betrayal. She wanted to make them suffer somehow, even though she knew this would have its own consequences....

Well, have you ever felt like Ingrid? Maybe the betrayal was not about an affair your partner was having, but it was a betrayal just the same. Maybe it was about your friend criticizing you behind your back. Maybe it was about not being invited to something others of your circle of friends were. Maybe it was a member of your family having put you down when you were vulnerable to their evaluations. Maybe it was someone close to you sharing information you had shared with them in confidence, leaving you exposed and embarrassed. Oh, there are many ways we can feel betrayed. There are many hurts and disappointments we can carry. And if we carry them long enough and deep enough they can work resentment and bitterness in us. If they really eat into us, we can get obsessed about getting even, or we can believe that maybe the other person's slander about us is true. "Maybe I am really hopeless." Or, "Maybe I really am ugly, stupid, a loser." How can I forgive in such situations? How do I let go and let be? Or, on the other

hand, how do I find a way to take responsibility for my actions, to repent, to change. I need courage and strength for this. I need to trust the process. I need to trust that I will survive this and in time become a stronger, deeper, better human being for having undertaken the journey toward spiritual rehabilitation.

The gospel is about repentance – about saying sorry and changing our behaviour. It is about forgiveness – letting go and opening our heart to building loving relationships again. It is about receiving the forgiveness of another – with remorse, gratitude and a commitment to do things better. The gospel is about all this. But what if we just can't do it? What if try as we may, we just can't rid ourselves of the poison within, the poison of resentment, bitterness, defensiveness or a humiliation that rages or weeps or holds on and won't let go? What if we feel that what is going on inside us is bigger and more powerful than the gospel call?

These are the questions I want to wrestle with this morning. And I will do so in two steps. First, I will take you out of the present for a moment so that you can enter the world of John the Baptist and the people of his time. And after we consider his message to people then, we will see if perhaps there's also a message for us here and now today. Ok?

Let's begin, then, by traveling, traveling way back, 2000 years. We are heading to the Judean countryside. There is a river that runs through a large open space, the river Jordan. We are part of a crowd. Why have we all gathered? We have gathered to hear someone many claim is a prophet. Apparently he is somewhat of an enigma - either a deranged freak, or a great prophet in disguise. Many believe he is Elijah, the first great prophet come back from the dead, a prophet believed to return one day to herald the advent of the messiah. Elijah resurrected would prepare the way for God's salvation to come... And there he is: we get a glimpse of him. Goodness he does look like a freak, dressed in rags. Evidently, he lives on locusts and wild honey. What a diet! No wonder he's so thin. Can God really be speaking through this wild man? Is he, indeed, a prophet as many are claiming he is? Well, let's hear what he has to say.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "we have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

John is saying that it does not matter that we are the chosen people of God. It doesn't matter that we have the special privilege of being called by God. We are not specially protected or let off the hook. With the call of God comes the responsibility of God. God is looking for those who are willing and ready to be honestly confronted and honestly committed. We can't hang onto the achievements of our ancestors. We can't pull the privileged race card. We as persons of our own time and generation, are responsible for how we live, the decisions we make and the priorities by which our lives will be shaped. We have much to repent of. We have much that needs to be confessed and changed. It's part of being human. We are not alone. John's message will not let us off the hook. It's a wakeup call.

But hold on a minute. Are we just to feel bad about ourselves? Is that the point? Are we to confess how bad we are, how much change needs to happen in our lives, how complacent or irresponsible or indifferent or selfish or jealous or focused on our own needs and issues we are? Where do we go from here if we are willing to face some of this? Let's listen to John again to see whether there's more to his message.

“The crowds asked him, “What then should we do.” Give us a way forward that's constructive, achievable, doable, John. “In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’”

Goodness me, John has advice for everyone.... constructive advice. Is this what forgiveness is about? Is it about finding constructive ways to move forward in our relationships and our actions? John tells people in their own time and place that they ought to be generous with what they have. They ought to be less greedy, and more satisfied with a modest lifestyle. They ought to use their power over others as a means to serve others rather than take advantage of them. So what happens to our anger which seeks out retaliation? What happens with our sense of betrayal or hurt that seeks to

humiliate the one who has betrayed or hurt us? What happens when we feel so awful about ourselves because we have been subjected to constant criticism or put down so that we have internalized the judgements of others in how we see ourselves?

Forgiveness is not just a passive thing. It's not about just letting someone off the hook and continuing as before. It requires some constructive action on our part.

If we are bitter at life because someone close to us has maybe died of cancer, for instance, we can get involved proactively in supporting a cure for cancer, becoming more informed, becoming more involved in groups or as support to others going through what we've been through. Constructive ways forward are ways in which our forgiveness, our letting go bears fruit. It's not about having to change our attitude to the disease. It's not about having to let go the feeling that a terrible injustice and tragedy has taken place for a precious life to be cut down before its time. But by taking constructive steps to enrich our lives, we are no longer just victims, but human beings who believe love and abundance must rise again in us and be the defining center of our lives – not death and defeat, but life-giving love... patient, empathetic, listening, companionship, resurrecting love.

And it is the same in relationships as much as in circumstances of misfortune and tragedy. Unless we find creative ways to "bear the fruits of repentance" or the fruits of forgiveness," we will stay stuck in a situation of victim-hood, with no constructive way of taking responsibility for our part in someone else's pain, or toward opening a path to peace and healing of the bitterness, betrayal and anger.

Of course, we can't heal all conflicts or all hurts. Sometimes, the best we can do will still leave us limping – missing terribly the loved one in our lives; being reminded time and again the injustice of what has taken place; being awakened again to the betrayal we have suffered every time we witness a similar betrayal in the lives of others. But the process of repenting, of forgiving, of experiencing forgiveness, is a repeated one throughout life, until our dying day. Is there ever a time we ought not to consider our responsibility in some misunderstanding, conflict or negative experience? Is there ever a time we do not need to ready ourselves to forgive from our hearts? Is there ever a time we do not need to recognize our need to be forgiven? No.

We are not made for life with God because we have achieved the gospel ideals. No. We are made for life with God because we struggle to approximate the gospel's ideals in all the particular circumstances of our lives. In loving us and embracing us, God also embraces our failures, our mediocre efforts at rehabilitation, our pettiness, our better intentions gone wrong, our steps forwards and then backwards. We should be well practiced saying sorry and feeling it. We should be well practiced forgiving others and living into it constructively. We should be well practiced saying thank you for forgiveness and meaning it. And we should be well practiced feeling joy at the conviction that, in the words of the apostle Paul: nothing can ultimately separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Nobody can tear us away from God's love or get in the way of it reaching us. Pray it, and pray it daily.... Pray for the courage to repent, pray for the heart to forgive, pray for the freedom to receive forgiveness with heart-felt thanksgiving, pray for the faith to believe that you are loved infinitely despite all you've been made to feel about yourself.... Pray it... Amen.