

Column

Once upon a time a minister began a new pastorate. He was very young, and the people of the church were eager for him to begin his ministry among them.

In his first sermon, he told those who packed the pews that those who have received Christ's forgiveness need themselves to forgive others. Almost to a person, everyone on the way out of church said that it was a great sermon, one they could really apply to their lives.

But then came the next Sunday. Again, the church was packed and people were in great expectation. To their amazement, the sermon he gave was the same one he had given a week before. Because he was new and young, most of those attending the service were gracious and again, on the way out of church, complimented him on his sermon. After all, he and his family were just getting moved, and, no doubt, he was

under a lot of stress. Perhaps he had forgotten what he had preached on the week before.

Things began to change the week that followed when he preached the exact same sermon. Members of the administrative board held a hastily called meeting and appointed one of their number to meet with the minister and find out if he had any more sermons.

As it turned out, the man appointed ran into the minister in the post office that very afternoon. Taking him aside, he cleared his throat and began: “Preacher, some of the church people have noticed that you have given the same sermon three weeks in a row. I was just wondering if you were planning to preach a different one this coming Sunday?”

The new minister responded: “I am glad they have noticed. When they get forgiveness down, I will move on to another subject.”

I have no way of knowing if this story is true, but it has been my experience that when I have preached on forgiveness I get more responses than when I preach on any other subject. Perhaps the reason is most of us are not that good at forgiving. Extending forgiveness is hard work, especially if we ‘know’ we are in the right in a situation. Hard work or not, it is something we must do if we are to be faithful followers of the One who as He hung on the cross cried out: “Father forgive.”

The English poet George Herbert puts us on the right track when he said: “He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven”.

Jesus says as much in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In order to breath in the fresh air of reconciliation, we need to

breathe out the stall air of resentment and all that goes with it.

But what if the other party, especially in cases where this person was clearly in the wrong, does not desire to seek reconciliation? What do we do then? I think it would be to pray that God will give him a better mind. Our part is to let go of the baggage that goes with unforgiveness – hate and thoughts of revenge. In so doing, we shall find new freedom and be able receive all the blessings God wants to give us.

Have you, have I, heard and responded to the message of the young preacher's one sermon? If not, it is time we lay aside excuses and get on with doing what we know to be right and life-giving.

O Eternal God, help us faithfully to fulfil our duties to thee and to each other. Put far from us all unkind thoughts, anger, evil speaking and anything like an unforgiving spirit. Give us

tender hearts, full of affection and sympathy toward all. Preserve us from selfishness, and grant that day by day, walking in love, we may grow up into the likeness of thy blessed Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

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