

A couple of years ago I led a tour of Israel. Our guide was Zach. He was a great story teller and the people adored him. Every night he and I talked about how the day had gone and discussed what we would do the following day. During one of those times I asked him, "The people adore you. What's your secret?"

On our table there were salt and pepper shakers. He picked up the salt shaker and he placed it in the middle of the table. He said, "On a tour there are two things. There's information. That's what the salt shaker is. Information is what everyone thinks they've signed up for. That's how the tour's advertised and that's what everyone is taking notes and pictures for." And then he picked up the pepper shaker. He said, "But the second thing on a tour is relationships." And he put the pepper shaker in front of the salt shaker. "That's the most important part. Relationships make or break a tour. If the relationships among the people are sour, it doesn't matter if I flew everyone to the moon. After they return home all they will remember was how they never had a sense of ease on the tour. On the other hand, if the relationships were great, if everyone felt like they were cared for, that all of their needs were met, and if they made a couple of new friends, then they will remember the tour as a 'great tour.' That's my 'secret': Relationships are everything."

This morning we're going to talk about how with God relationships are everything too.

## **OPENING PRAYER**

### **MATTHEW 16:13-20**

**Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar- Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against**

it. <sup>19</sup> **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**" <sup>20</sup> **Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.**

My best friend betrayed me. My boss slandered me. A gold digger stole \$50,000 from my great aunt.

Have you experienced anything like this, maybe worse? What do we do with these experiences? What do we do with the people who've hurt us?

In the Gospel, Jesus said to Peter, **Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."**

The "**keys of the kingdom of heaven**" is the power to forgive sins. As you may remember from confirmation, we call this the Office of the Keys.

Forgiveness is fundamental to our walk with God. It pervades every part of our worship. We begin and end with the sign of the Cross, reminding ourselves of our Baptisms. We confess our sins and the pastor proclaims the absolution. We pray about, we sing about, and we read about forgiveness of sins in the Bible. And we receive the Lord's Supper, the body and blood of Jesus, for the remission of sins.

Pastors forgive sins, and Christian lay people forgive sins, all in the name of Christ. This is what Jesus and Peter were talking about.

Later in the Gospel, we read, **Matthew 18:21-22, "Peter came up and said to (Jesus), 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?'"** <sup>22</sup> **Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"**

But what about the 78<sup>th</sup> sin?! That's how we think, right?! But "7" is a number of God. It signifies completeness. There is no 78 or 79. Jesus wasn't talking about counting sins. Rather, he was saying, emphatically, that we must forgive each other for everything all of the time!

But you already knew that. Earlier, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **Matthew 6:14-15, “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”**

This means we must forgive each other just as we’ve been forgiven, otherwise we will be denying, working against, God’s grace which already flows through us.

Consider again these statements:

- My friend betrayed me;
- My boss slandered me;
- A man stole from my great aunt.

Can I forgive these people? I must forgive these people! For the sake of my relationship with God, I must forgive them! That’s what Jesus was saying.

I began by talking about how relationships are everything. Our relationships with family members, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances lift us up and encourage our hearts. Or they break us.

I was talking to an old friend the other day and he asked how I was doing. I said, “Nothing’s broken and no one’s yelling at me. What more can I ask for?!” That’s the long and short of it, isn’t it. When we have peace in our home and work, life is good!

But at the root of our relationships with other people is our relationship to God. And in the heart of this relationship is forgiveness. Right in the heart, right in the middle of that part of us that’s filled with so much anger, jealousy, and pride.

But the Lord forgives us for it all. And he did this so that we would forgive one another.

This is so important to understand, for if we don’t take hold of it for what it really is – our eternal redemption by God himself – how can we forgive other people?

A personal example: A person whom I had thought was a friend betrayed me. He humiliated me publically. It was not a small thing. I was emotionally devastated.

And that was the end of the relationship. My heart turned against that person. I really hated him. Indeed, I wished for him the same pain he'd caused me, and more.

I don't like to admit it but it took me a long time to forgive that person. And this is how it happened.

Some time had passed, and I had completely forgotten about that person who had hurt me. I'd gotten on with my life. However, one day after an angry outburst I had with another person, I realized my reaction had been over the top, out of proportion with the offense. And I began to reflect on where that anger had come from.

Indeed, I realized that I was angry all of the time! I'm not a yeller, but there was a very short fuse underneath this peaceful exterior you see.

A light went on: I was carrying in my heart the bitterness that had been planted there by the betrayal I had experienced in that relationship, and it had abscessed. It was affecting everything in my life.

And I thought about that person, and I wondered how they were doing. I shocked myself as I thought about how I cared for them now. I thought about how they must be feeling and why they did what they did to me. And with that one simple step, putting myself in their shoes, I empathized with them; I felt their pain.

And I remembered Jesus and how he proclaimed absolution for those who nailed him to the Cross: **"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing."**

And I found it in my heart at that moment to say, "Dear Lord Jesus, forgive me for I have sinned against you." Indeed, when we withhold forgiveness from other people we sin against God.

In that instant the burden on my heart was lifted, and I was free.

Friends in Christ, if you have a heavy heart because of unresolved conflicts in your relationships, come to the Cross on Calvary with me, seeing in your mind's eye Christ's sacrifice for the sins of the world and for you, and hear him say, "**Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**" (Luke 23:34).

If you are angry with another person because of what they did to you, how they hurt you, lied to you, stole from you, deceived you, betrayed you, come with me into the loving arms of Jesus, your Lord and Savior.

If you are filled with regret for sins you have committed against another person, sins for which you do not feel you have been forgiven, receive this gift now. As an ordained servant of Christ and by his authority, I declare to you that your sins have been forgiven in the name of Jesus.

Friends in Christ, you are forgiven. The burdens you've been carrying around in your heart have been taken away.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, know that for Jesus his relationship with you is everything to him.

This week may your relationships with one another be everything to you.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.