

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from May 23, 2021

Pentecost Sunday



Welcome to Pentecost Sunday, the day we remember the Spirit descending on those who believed in Jesus, and it is recognized as the birth of the church.

Act of Centering

The Festival of Weeks, or Pentecost, was an important Jewish festival that was celebrated 50 days after Passover. People from all over made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship during this celebration the spring harvest, of which the first fruits of which were brought to the Temple, and it also celebrated of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.

I invite you to close your eyes and breathe deeply. As I give a reflection on the day... imagine it in your mind, or of a time in your life when God made himself particularly and powerfully present to you in your life.

[Music begins underneath the words] The typical day at that time of year in Jerusalem was clear blue skies and a baking hot sun.... The streets are filled with marketplace vendors.... foods prepared for the long-distance travelers ascending on the city.... hear their voices in the distance.... a gentle breeze fills the city air with the aroma of the harvest offerings and the vendor's breads and fish and other foods...

You have gathered together with other believers in Jesus.... Hear a sound like a strong blowing wind..... see what seemed to be like tongues of fire that separated and rested on each of them... they were filled with the Holy Spirit.... what does that feel like?.... what do we feel when we sense his Spirit?.... Meditate on that in the next moment of silence. [Silence with background music, ending with: We have gathered because everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Act 2:21) Amen. Open your eyes, and let's stand as comfortable and sing...

Music (vv 1,3,5) Spirit of God, Descend

Theme

The Spirit descends on the believers, and international pilgrims all hear them speaking in their own native language... and it confuses them. Peter gets up and explains to them about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They disciples witnessed this. Jesus then ascended to the right hand of the throne of God and

poured out the promised Holy Spirit and that is what they were hearing and seeing. And in fulfillment of the prophet Joel, and the writings of David, God made this Jesus whom they crucified both Lord and Messiah. The people were convicted and asked what they should do? Peter replied to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of sins* and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise, Peter says, is for every generation and for all others who are far off, whom the Lord our God will call. Many that day repented and accepted Jesus' *forgiveness*. (See Acts 2 for Act of Centering immediately above)

We are talking about Foundational Prayer, the Lord's prayer, and we've reached the part of the Lord's prayer which seeks God's forgiveness as we forgive others. A quick morality tale:

There was once a hand whose fingers were great friends. The owner of this hand started a dangerous job and, despite the care he gave the rest of the fingers, the thumb always came off worse, with lots of cuts and bruises.

At first, the other fingers asked the thumb's forgiveness for their clumsiness, and the thumb did indeed forgive them. However, this happened so many times that, one day, the thumb decided to forgive the fingers no more. He stretched himself away from the fingers, and wanted nothing to do with them.

Initially, the thumb looked dignified, straight, rigid and aloof. However, that kind of position was forced and ridiculous. The owner even had to keep that hand in his pocket, and there the fingers suffered in darkness and obscurity.

Finally, the thumb understood that it had all been his fault, and he asked the fingers' forgiveness, fearful that they would reject him. On the contrary, the fingers easily forgave him, because they - better than anyone - knew that we all make mistakes. Friends once again, all five of them worked together to prove to the owner that they were perfectly well again. Before long, they returned to the light again, this time well aware that they should always forgive each other, and thus avoid ending up inside a gloomy and depressing pocket.

("A Resentful Thumb" by Pedro Pablo Sacristan - freestoriesforkids.com)

Call to Worship (L = Leader, C = Congregation)

The New Testament is filled with forgiveness teachings as a key concept to escape the gloomy darkness of sin. Our lay reader will lead us in some selections... in our call to worship.

L: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?
Up to seven times?"

C: Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.
(Matthew 18:21b-22)

L: For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

C: But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

L: [Jesus said], "A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

C: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)

L: Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. For-give as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:13-14)

C: [Where do we find the strength to forgive so much so often?]

L: "...Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins." (Mark 11:24-26)

C: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37c) (All from the NIV)

Prayer Music

Spirit of the Living God

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me

Prayers Let's pray. Almighty God, by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit, you send your light on the hearts of your faithful, opening the way of eternal life to every nation. Through the living out of your truth, continue to pour out your Spirit on your people today who have gathered here and online to praise you for your love and your gracious forgiveness.

We recognize the strength and glory that is due your name as we worship you in the beauty of your holiness. Your voice is powerful and majestic. You restore the spring in the step of your people, blessing us with your peace. When we think of your glorious majesty, we are over-whelmed. Yet you come to us in cleansing grace and call us to share in your purposes on the earth. (Psalm 29, Isaiah 6:1-8)

Everything that is good comes from you. Be with us who are experiencing

difficulties needs, for the family and friends of Pastor Chuck's father who passed away this week, but there are others from past weeks and for people and situations that we name in our heart and mind that we are keenly aware of and we lift them up to you as well. Send your Spirit on us once again -- inspire us to dwell on those things that are right, and by your mercy guide us to do only what is holy through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading Matthew 18:23-35

Intro: Earlier, we heard Peter ask Jesus how often we were to forgive someone and his answer was 77, or 70 times 7, depending upon the translation. If we start doing math, we've already misunderstood. The intent is to be unlimited, and Paul says that love keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus then tells a parable to illustrate why forgiveness is to be unlimited.

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "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. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (NIV)

Music (vv 1,2,3,4) Forgive our Sins as We Forgive

Sermon *The Forgiving Formula*

The Old Testament prophets warn us that we should deal with our sinful failures effectively.

They warn that sin separates us from God. Isaiah says, ... he can still save. God's ears are not stopped up. He can still hear. But your [sins] have separated you from your God. Your wrongheaded lives caused the split between you and God so that he will not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2, (NIV & MSG comb.)) Jeremiah adds that God asks, "Why should I forgive you? Your children wander off, leaving me, taking up with gods [priorities and pleasures] that are not even gods. [Yet] I satisfied their deepest needs. Should I not take serious measures...? (Jeremiah 5:7,9a (NIV, MSG comb.)) and the same prophet laments, "We've been contrary and willful, sinned and rebelled; and [God hasn't] forgiven... He covered himself in a thick blanket of clouds so that no prayers could get through. Examine the way we are living, return to the Lord and reorder our lives under God. Let's lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven and [confess]... (Lamentations 3:44,40-42 (NIV & MSG comb.))

Sin Separates from God

If we don't strive to live as he desires, it will lead to additional failures that will increase divisions among his people. At the very heart of the Bible story from beginning to end, as was hinted at even in these prophet readings; is God's determined desire to restore his creation and re-unite his people with himself and with each other. God desires that his children get along, that we make the most of our community life together as a place of wholeness and healing; and that revolves around the life of love and forgiveness. Someone once said the church is an aquarium, a crucible where we learn how to do it right... not that we get it right all the time.

Sin Separates from Others

This is why Jesus taught us to pray, Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Say it with me -- **Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

There is an interwoven connection of relationship with God and our relationship with each other. We seek a spirit of compassionate forgiveness toward those who have trespassed against us, whether or not they recognize their error, or confess their faults, or desire to change their ways. We are not to relish in our grievances and hang on to our hurts. Most of us know already that harboring our hurts does more damage to us than it does to the person who hurt us.

That takes more than merely muttering the words. Unfortunately, we sometimes short-

Forgiveness is not: Mere words

change the process, making it a legal transaction rather than a spiritual one. We ask for forgiveness from another, or offer words of accepting forgiveness from another, and sometimes that is all it takes, but not always. We may think we are done because we have said the words, and we move on even though it hasn't penetrated to the heart and we haven't effectively dealt with the wounds that we gave or that we received.

And if we move on too quickly too often, our forgiveness requested or received may end up as not being sincere, but only a strategy: *If I say I'm sorry, then I can get away with whatever I do, so I'll just keep on doing it because I can get away with it.* The servant in Matthew 18 -- forgiven a tremendous amount of debt. The servant then turned around and refused to forgive another servant who owed him just a little bit. Some say this character did not understand what he got when his debt was forgiven. He did not see the pain he caused to his master by incurring all of that debt and not paying it. He probably did not even see that the debt was his fault. He wasn't sorry for it. All he saw was a wonderful relief from a terrible circumstance he found himself in. He took his forgiveness for granted.

And so not understanding what he received, when his co-worker asked for a small mercy from him, he could not relate to that person's struggle, he had no compassion for him, and he was not gracious to him. All he could see was his own loss, that he was not receiving what he was owed. Just as when he was on the other side of it and all he could see was his own dire circumstances of debt and could not see the pain he was inflicting on the master, now he could still see only the pain that was being inflicted on him. He couldn't get to the other side.

A lack of willingness to forgive *sometimes* reveals an insincerity in asking for forgiveness; and when it is done in this method, to just say the words of forgiveness not to make it right but to simply to get beyond it – when it is sought not as a regret of wrong actions (as it ought to be) -- but is only seeking an escape from unpleasant consequences. If we turn it into a mathematical formula rather than heart-felt “I shouldn't have done that in the first place”; and if we can escape our failures with the surface-y type of forgiveness, we are much more likely to repeat those failures again because there are no consequences, and effort to make it right.

It becomes an escape from consequences that this servant may have well felt he had *earned* by his

Forgiveness is not: Insincere

Forgiveness is not: Earned

great use of words – how eloquently he expressed his needs to the master – he earned his freedom from the debt by his great craftsmanship of “begging ability”.

But true forgiveness is not about saying the right words (only), or even performing the proper external actions (only). Acts of forgiveness without the spirit of forgiveness becomes a form of works righteousness (“I’ve earned it” because I’m a good beggar, or said the right words, or done the right sacrifices or whatever), and offering forgiveness becomes a boast of self-righteousness (“See how forgiving I am, I am better than everyone else”). Or, on the opposite side, we turn it into a legalistic self-punishment (I feel bad because I’ve done wrong, and so I am going to punish myself and keep on punishing myself and feel bad about it forever); and gain approval for that. Thus we earn our forgiveness by beating ourselves up for our failure forever. All these avenues seek to earn and deserve our relationship rather than seeing forgiveness as a grace that God freely and lovingly gives us; and that we, in turn, should desire to give to each other.

Sometimes, when we do something wrong, we can be racked with guilt –

Forgiveness is not: About feeling better

and that is not necessarily a bad thing! It is like the warning lights in your car – it is not trying to beat you up, it is telling you that there is something wrong and you need to fix it. [Noone knows anything about warning lights anymore, apparently 😊] Sometimes guilt is like the warning light in the car – it is warning you that you need to get something fixed before something goes really terribly wrong.

We may discover a ritual, event, or process that will make us *feel* much better. Such rituals and moments can be therapeutic moments, and even holy moments – and very important for the process of what we are doing. But forgiveness is not *exclusively* about recovering from bad feelings. It is more than that. Paul describes the difference in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11 where he says that worldly sorrow brings death because it is only a self-centered sorrow over the painful consequences of sin; whereas godly sorrow is about the sin, the failure committed, and it drives us to God (or others) in earnestness, and eagerness, and alarm, and longing, and concern to make things right so that our hearts are again innocent and pure. Do you see the difference between the two? One is sorry you got caught and have consequences, and one is, “I don’t want to do that again, because it was wrong”, and it motivates us to, as much as possible, to correct and restore whatever went wrong.

This passage clearly indicates that God's forgiveness is not only about a heavenly

Forgiveness is not: Strictly legal

judicial act which sets us free from condemnation; nor is it ultimately a legal obligation that we *have to* offer each other. That's not the point. Forgiveness is not about the feeling of the right feelings, or saying the right formula of words, or doing the right things, or making restitution or reparations, or even fulfilling a spiritual law; although it may well include all of these by the time we are done.

Forgiveness at its best is an expression of sincere love that reaches out in the brokenness that that failure has brought to a relationship. It doesn't try to "undo" a past that cannot be undone, but it does try to reclaim us, and reshape us, and restore us, and free us from that past and lead us into new future with new possibilities - to be the best we can be, and relationships to be the best that they can become within our power to make that happen... sometimes it is beyond our own power.

Forgiveness is:
 * **love reaching**
 * **transformation**
 * **restoration**
 * **renewal**
 * **reconciliation**

We are enabled to experience God's overcoming love that can re-unite humanity and fill us with hope for a glorious future of shalom – (that contented peace that comes from the wholeness of a full and blessed life).

This kind of healing may take time, require discernment, and ultimately requires a willingness to learn, if we are going to move forward. The corporate Christian family, our life together, is an ongoing group activity of learning to love and to live together in increasingly healthy ways.

If innocent Jesus can hang on a cross as cursed, as a criminal – because the world is so broken by our sin -- and he can look at those who put him there for religious preservation, for political gain, or because they were following orders, or following the crowd, or having participated in the world's brokenness -- that results from not following God's ways -- and while hanging there in agony, he calls on God to forgive them for sending him to this torturous death – and he does so -- because he understood that they didn't really understand what they were doing when they did it. If he can do that -- in love -- for people while they were yet willful sinners against him, then it only seems natural that we who follow him should be able to strive, at least, to learn to forgive others in hope of the world he came to recreate.

Pastor Ed Myers said it in a blog: we all mess up... [even] our friends, our family, and those closest to us ... wrong us in some fashion. [After] Christ went through the miserable passion (his suffering) and death on the cross, then he rose and appeared to them, to the one who denied him (to Peter) and to the others who ran

for the hills when he was arrested. Does he show up with revenge on his mind? or a least some bitterness? or disappointment or frustration or an “I told you so”? He could have done all of those. He could have held on to their sins, but he didn’t. [He loved.] He could have waited for them to come to him and say they were sorry. But he didn’t. [He loved.] He took the first step. His first words to them in that room to these deniers and deserters are “Shalom (Peace) be with you.” Shalom means “completeness, soundness, well-being.” It’s like he is saying, “We’re okay. We’re going to make this work. Our relationship is healthy, and I truly wish you fullness of life.” He took the first step to mend their broken relationship. [He loved.] He forgave. That’s our model. Then his next words were, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” “And with that”, the Bible says [and in what many interpret as John’s version of the day of Pentecost], “And with that he breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And then he said, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven [if you don’t, they aren’t]...” (See John 20:21-23)

The formula for forgiveness is summarized for us: forgive us... as we forgive others.... Love others, as Christ loved us... Isn’t that so simply to say? Hmmm. So hard to do... Let’s pray.

Prayer God of all creation, you are pure and holy. You created a perfect environment and beautiful beings for your pleasure. All that you made is good. Yet today we find ourselves in an imperfect world, and we confess that the sin in our lives separates us from your will and your ways, and from each other.

Forgive us Lord, for choices contrary to your purposes, for refusing to live by your guidance, for failing to trust that your ways are for our own well-being. Give us the power through your Holy Spirit to turn from our willfulness and trust you alone for our rule of life. Remind us that you have forgiven us so many times – too many times to count. You remind us that while we too often tend to bring conflict and separation to our relationships, you insist on bringing shalom, peace and wholeness and healing – and you want us to bring shalom to others – you want to do that through us. Renewing God, for all that is broken in our minds and bodies, we ask your healing. For all that is amiss in our choices and our relationships, we ask your forgiveness, for all that works against life and blessing in our hearts, and in the world, we open ourselves to your transforming grace. Heal us, forgive us, and make us new. We trust in your infinite grace and your offer of forgiveness and healing. Empower us to eagerly desire to do for others what you have done for us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Music # 389 Freely, Freely

Blessing Now go in the name of the God who does not withhold his love, but faithfully listens to the prayers of those who reverently worship him, freely seeking and offering his reconciling peace. Amen.