

Sermon for Sunday, November 5, 1978, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW TO BE A BIG LOVER"

St. Luke 7:36-50

Text: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

St. Luke 7:47

Our sermon title this morning reminds me of the story about the young man who was not having much success with the ladies. He decided to try to do something about it and when he saw a book at the bookstore, entitled "How to Hug", he bought it. However, when he got home he discovered he had bought volume 13 of the encyclopedia!

This morning I want to talk about forgiveness. A large part of my professional life is spent in dealing with people who have broken relationships. The fact is, even in the very best relationship from time to time a certain amount of breakdown will occur. You see, each of us is imperfect. We will do things or say things or act in certain ways that hurt other people. And a breakdown occurs. By the same token, because each of us is sensitive and has needs and expectations of others, when they don't fulfill those needs or meet those expectations, our feelings are hurt and brokenness occurs.

But the real question is not whether or not breakdowns between us and those we love the most will occur. They will. No, the real question is how we will deal with it when it happens. Frequently, I see people trying to ignore problems that develop between themselves and others. Unfortunately that doesn't work very well. You may push a problem into your unconsciousness but it doesn't go away. It stays there and from the murky darkness of the unconscious mind it works its deadly poison.

See how it works! First, the Bible says that you can't love God and hate or resent your brother. St. John writes, "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar..." (I John 4:20) That means that if I do not deal with hate and resentment in my life, it damages my spiritual life. You can never have an adequate relationship to God when your relationship to another is broken by bitterness. But second, resentment and bitterness can damage you physically. Dr. James A. Stringham, a psychiatrist, tells the story of a middle aged woman suffering from asthma, skin eruptions and other illnesses that were severe enough to hospitalize her several times a year; of a young school teacher who lived in a succession of boarding houses because the land ladies didn't like her, who had no friends, who felt her second-graders misbehaved in order to persecute her; of a young business man who had a history of ulcers and business failures. Dr. Stringham said they each had an identical underlying problem, a resentment he or she had not dealt with. He went on to add, "As a practicing psychiatrist...I have come to regard resentment as a cancer of the personality that is as deadly as any physical growth."

A third thing we can say about bitterness and resentment is that when we are unforgiving, we are setting the standard for God's forgiveness of us. Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (St. Matthew 7:2) That's a hard saying, isn't it? I've often wondered about that statement, but I'm convinced it isn't that God is unwilling to forgive us. And surely he knows our frailties, our sins, our failures, our inability to be forgiving. So why would he judge us by our own standards of judgment? And I think the reason is from our side, not God's side. You see, I think our capacity--or our incapacity--to forgive limits our ability to receive forgiveness--

our receiving apparatus is defective. So, it isn't that God is so mean as to limit his forgiveness by how much we forgive. No, the problem is from our side--we limit our ability to be forgiven when we are unforgiving.

So, when we do not forgive it limits our love for God, it creates physical symptoms, and it limits our capacity to receive forgiveness. But this raises a more serious question. If the failure to forgive causes those problems in my life, and if I am unable to forgive because of my own humanness, how can I ever practice forgiveness? That's a good question, isn't it? You see, the fact is, most of us truly would like to practice forgiveness when relationships between us and others are broken. But the fact is, we do not have the ability. Do you find that to be true in your life? I know I do in mine.

Well, the first point I want to make this morning is this: the ability to forgive is something given to you by God. Do you remember how Alexander Pope once put it? He wrote, "To err is human, to forgive is divine." And that is true, isn't it? To make mistakes, to err, belongs to our humanness, but forgiveness doesn't. As it turns out, forgiveness is divine. Well, what do we mean by that? The Bible tells us plainly. The Bible says that when Jesus is in our hearts, when we have God's Spirit at work in us, certain fruits occur. Do you remember what the Bible says? It says, "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." (Galatians 5:22) So the ability to relate well to others is a result of a heart surrendered to Jesus; it is the consequence of God's Spirit filling my innermost being. All of those characteristics that make for good and right relationships between myself and others are a consequence of Jesus being in my heart.

Is there some old grudge in your heart this morning? Is there some hurt, some pain, that someone has caused you that rankles you, that is a source of bitterness, of resentment, of hate? And maybe you have tried to forgive that hurt only to find that you cannot. The problem, you see, is that we are starting at the wrong place. Where we really need to start is not with the other person, not with the offense committed against us, but the place we need to start is with our own relationship to Jesus.

Does that make sense to you? In and of ourselves we do not have the capacity to forgive. But when we surrender our hearts to Jesus, when we are filled with his Spirit, he brings into our hearts love, and joy, and peace, and patience and all of the capacities to forgive, to heal the brokenness between us and another. You see, it is the wrong question to ask, "why did that other person sin; why did he treat me so badly." The right question to ask is, "what is wrong with my relationship to Jesus that I do not have the ability to forgive?"

Now, having said that the ability to forgive is a gift from God, let me suggest several principles to you to help you put forgiveness into practice. The first principle is what I call the poor memory principle. Over in the book of Jeremiah, God tells of the time when he will write his law on the hearts of his people and he says, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." God forgives and forgets--that's the poor memory principle. As a young man in my first pastorate I did something that displeased one of my elders. I went to him to ask his forgiveness and he said to me, "Well, I will forgive you, but I won't forget it." Do you think he really forgave me? I remember reading a remark made once by a great lady. She had been particularly nice to another person when a friend reminded her, "Don't you remember what that person once said about you?" "No," replied the lady, "I distinctly remember forgetting it!"

One of the biggest problems in putting broken marriages back together is this thing of forgetting. Each of the marriage partners feels hurt and wounded and I spend hours listening to them drag out offenses and hurts that go back for years. They have not learned the art of having a poor memory. If someone has offended you and you have forgiven them, you must also forget it. Don't talk about it. Don't think about it or permit your mind to dwell on it. Don't drag it out and rehash it at every opportunity or throw it up to the other person. Deliberately put it out of your mind by an act of the will. Be like the little boy who had a fight with his best friend. He came in the house crying to tell his mother how bad Roger had been. But thirty minutes later his mother saw him out in the yard playing with Roger. She asked him how he could play with Roger again when he and Roger had had such a fight. "Well," replied the little lad, "me and Roger is good forgetters." Yes, the poor memory principle.

A second principle for letting God's Spirit work through you in forgiveness is the ping principle. You see, if you do something to me, and then I do something to you, and then you do something back to me, we are playing the ping pong game of retaliation.

Have you ever caught yourself in the ping pong syndrome? I know I have! But at some point where there is a ping, we have to stop the pong! Look at Jesus on the cross. Yet, with pain like a searing blindness in his brain, with agony twisting his tormented features, with a sword wound gaping in his side, with his hands and feet pierced with cruel spikes, through parched and bleeding lips Jesus whispered, "Father forgive them..." There had been a terrible ping, but there was no pong. The spear of hurt has to stop somewhere. Wholeness in human relationships can never occur as long as sin is ricocheting back and forth between us. Somewhere the thrust of sin must be absorbed and stopped and the ping pong ball stop bouncing. And isn't that what Jesus meant when he told us to turn the other cheek? There may be a ping in my life, but if the love of Jesus is working through my heart, there will be no pong.

A third principle for letting God's Spirit work in us in forgiveness is what I call the "same boat" principle. Now, suppose someone hurts me, treats me unfairly, or deals dishonestly with me. Do I have a right to condemn them and resent them and have bitterness for them? Well, not if I'm in the same boat they are. Am I perfect? Do I always act fairly? Do I always do the loving thing? And of course I don't--and neither do you. It helps in forgiving others to remember that we are in the same boat and that we, too, are desperately in need of forgiveness. It is a little bit harder for me to throw pebbles at you when in my heart I know I deserve to have some rocks coming my way. Do you remember the incident in the life of Jesus when the Jews brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery? Because of her sin, the Jews were ready to stone her. But at that point Jesus reminded them of the same boat principle. He said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Our sermon this morning is entitled, "How To Be a Big Lover." Maybe you remember the title, but do you remember the text? It says, "Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much; but who is forgiven little, loves little."

You see, forgiveness begins with seeing myself as I really am--seeing myself as the real person I am. There is so much in my life that is bad and wrong; so much that is selfish and self-centered; so much that needs healing and redeeming. When I know that, then my love for Jesus overflows to think that he would forgive me--even me. Then--when I become a big lover because of the big forgiveness of Jesus, then his love can work in my life so that I can love others. Then--and only then--does forgiveness of others become a divine possibility for me.