

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:21-25

Special Preface to Prayer:

I am very proud of the amount of money Main Street has given for hurricane relief. Something else has happened.

Joe Chandler called me last week, and said that God was talking to him, and would not leave him alone. He could send money, BUT he had the earthmoving machines, the trained men, and the expertise to actually DO the work. He felt **called**.

There is so much bureaucracy to go through to get across state lines, etc., with FEMA and such. I wrote my contacts up and down, from New York to South Carolina to Atlanta, and they called Joe in just 48 hours! A miracle! Even then, there were roadblocks, and we aren't sure that his paperwork is adequate to get him across sections of closed borders and into the storm area. Any reasonable man would have thrown up his hands, and said, "I tried!" Joe got a TT and self-contained water and food, and took off believing that God would make a way, proper paperwork or not. God did make a way, and Joe is at Van Cleave United Methodist Church as a base camp for relief.

I am NOT merely talking about a Main Street member or praising Joe Chandler. I am trying to lift up that "hands on" *unreasonable acts of trust and faith* are just what happens when you let yourself go, and let God's Spirit move you. Money was enough, but he felt the call to Go and Do himself!

He is paying the men for 50 hours, but they will certainly work way beyond their paid hours, and they know that. They are giving themselves and their skills – because they feel compassion, because they cannot sit by and watch anymore, because God spoke, and they listened!

They left behind families and safety and comfort of home. Why? Because Jesus' teaching has sunk into their bones, and when *need* cried out, they heard, they listened, and they went!

God is in this. Pray for them, for those they help, and for the changes and growth that WILL occur in their lives and in the lives of others. Pray for their safety, pray for their health, pray for their energy and emotional strength to complete their tasks.

More than the storm, more than this crew, let God's Spirit move **you** – across the street, across the hall at Wesley Commons to make peace or offer hope, across the state by phone to call a distant relative or an old friend, across the aisle to make peace with a former friend, offer a hand up to someone even though they got themselves in trouble.

We need more compassion everywhere. Even in our homes, even in our families, even in our committees and Sunday School classes. I've done five funerals in the space of a few

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

weeks, and I have felt the grief and the regret and the missed moments and “things left unsaid” and “things left undone” at everyone’s, even my own grandmother’s service last Thursday. Folks, you’ve heard God’s voice! Don’t tell me you haven’t. At times, you talked yourselves out of acting on what you heard. Don’t tell me you haven’t.

Remember, our faith is about GRACE, not justice. God’s unmerited love, you have it, and you don’t deserve it. You are to give it even when others do not “deserve it.” That’s what God is telling us in every classroom, in every sermon, in every prodigal son story, lost sheep, lost coin, Good Samaritan, and of course, the Cross itself. Listen to God. Do the faith.

You can DO it only by loving and forgiving others.

When people are moved to DO things they’ve never done before, God’s Spirit is moving!

SERMON –

A few years ago, NBC Nightly News ended with a segment about a minister, who began visiting a guy in a nursing home across the hall from the minister’s father, who was also a resident there. Later, the guy confessed to a kidnapping years earlier. He had kidnapped that very same minister as a boy, and as a result of the kidnapping, the minister was left blind in one eye! Now, the newsworthy part was that the minister continued to visit his former kidnapper and to pray with him. It was a very powerful story of forgiveness! Would you? Could you?

In theory, forgiveness is easy! I remember thinking that forgiveness would be an easy thing. Just do as Jesus does! Just remember what Jesus did. How they mocked Him and mistreated Him and lied about Him, and then, He forgave them! Just DO THAT! But you know what? It’s not easy! In fact, I don’t even believe it is possible! To just one day decide I will now forgive my enemies, those who hurt me, those who judge me harshly, those who wish me ill, no, human beings are just like pet dogs, who have a natural mistrust of those who have kicked them, and they may growl, bark and bite BEFORE anyone gets a chance to do it again!

I was a biology major at Wofford College, and took an in-depth senior seminar on the theory of evolution for an entire year. The theory is NOT the gradualism that you were taught in high school, and has holes the size of Noah’s Ark, but that’s not my point this morning. The theory says one thing that makes me think forgiveness is an “unnatural act.” Evolution says those behaviors and traits, which tend toward survival and further the species are passed on to the next generation. Now, imagine caveman Dad and cavewoman Mom. Someone steals their meat. If they forgive, they go hungry. If they forgive again, they die! Out of the gene pool! Someone steals their children or harms their children. If they forgive, their family dies out. Out of the gene pool! Someone steals their cave. If they forgive, they freeze that winter and the family dies! Out of the gene pool! In primitive times, when food, family and shelter were ALL that existed,

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

forgiveness concerning the taking of any ONE of them would lead to death, and so HOW could the IDEA of forgiveness have developed? Not naturally! That is certain.

Fast forward up to the year 32. Look at a man named Jesus. Extremely forgiving fellow. Church and State accused Him unjustly. They tried Him and broke their own laws doing it. Condemned Him for nothing in particular, and nailed Him to the cross. While hanging there, He forgave them – the ones who nailed Him there! Unnatural and it appeared there on the cross that His line would die out! Blame it on forgiveness. Looks like forgiveness might get you killed in this old world.

William Willimon, my former faculty advisor, minister of the Duke Chapel, and now Bishop, said this about forgiveness, “Forgiveness is not natural; it is not a universal human virtue. Vengeance, retribution, violence are more natural human qualities. It is natural for humans to defend themselves, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when hurt, to bite back when bitten.” “Forgiveness is not natural. So Jesus’ parable is not about human beings in general, but about the peculiar people called Christians, who have been forgiven a huge debt to God, and who are expected to pass the forgiveness on.”

The heart of Jesus’ teaching was love, even of enemies, but in this scripture, we see the church backpedaling from the message. They want to know how many times another member of the church must be forgiven before they can consign that sinner to the devil. Notice the form of the question, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against **me**, how often should I forgive?” Jesus’ answer says, “If you’re going to put yourself in the place of God, then act like God! How many times would you like God to forgive your sins? Do the same toward your brother or sister.”

Forgiveness is NOT natural, but it IS something Christians know about for THEMSELVES, and must pray for the, for lack of a better word, supernatural power from God’s Holy Spirit to forgive others, who sin against them. We know that it is a miraculous act of love and grace for God in Christ to willingly die for my sins, and we must pray for the same heart and power that Jesus had to forgive those who sin against us. Pray for it because we are NOT born with it!

Note your young children, and see how forgiving they are. What they learn by age four is not to forgive, but to hug because Mom says so, and hit when Mom isn’t looking. Am I cynical? No. I just watched my children grow. He started it! THAT was for yesterday! You wore my shirt last week! You cannot LEARN to forgive; it takes repentance and the knowledge and faith AND understanding in your heart that YOU have been forgiven. Then, pray for the power to forgive others.

If you cannot forgive, as Jesus’ parable points out so clearly, perhaps it is because you do not yet understand what it cost God to forgive you! The inability to forgive may be a symptom of an immature faith. A faith that has forgotten or NEVER understood what it cost God to forgive you.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

Forgiveness as a character trait. Natural? NO! Christian? Yes, this struggle, and it IS a struggle against our very inborn nature, this struggle is the heart of the Christian life. If you hold on to bitterness, to hate, to anger and hurt, it will eat you up starting with your soul, and eventually, will affect your digestion, your blood pressure, some say aggravate arthritis, stress headaches, ability to sleep, under eat, and over eat. In fact, if you LOSE the battle to forgive, and give INTO long-term hatred, I guarantee that YOU will be harmed in more ways than you ever dreamt of harming your enemy. I know this myself. BUT the animal in us wants to bite and snarl and gather a pack of others to JOIN in our anger! That’s what gossip is often about. “I hate him, she hurt me, let me paint this so and so SOOOO horribly that YOU WILL JOIN MY HATE TEAM, and we can ALL hate together now.” Gimme an H A T E!

Gossip, the public tool of pack-animal hatred. The very opposite of going privately to God, praying for the strength to forgive AS WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. God’s spirit within us says STOP! Wait! I love you all! I wish no one to be harmed! Who wins? The animal heart? The tribes and sides and factions of bitterness, blame, and hatred OR the heart of God? Depends, on whether you pray for vengeance or pray for the power to forgive. Sometimes, it takes a long while to get past the barking and biting.

I hope only that our lives last long enough to let go of indignance and with humility GO TO God, praying for the spiritual power to forgive. I hope only that our lives last long enough. I say this because – God’s word in the New Testament is very clear. If you do not forgive, YOU WILL NOT BE FORGIVEN! It can take a long time!

A therapist wrote: “In working with abuse survivors, I have seen that, in the process, there comes a point when it is right to let go of the anger, and move on to forgiveness. I have seen people get to this point, and continue to hold on to the anger rather than moving on to the next step. Then, they seem to become their own worst abuser, and in a real way, allow the original abusive person to continue to have power over them. There comes a point when forgiveness must come if they are going to experience healing. The same is true for all of us. When forgiveness comes, and healing begins, it is a beautiful thing.

If you do not pray for the unnatural power to forgive, then you will naturally end up separated from God. If you die with anger and resentment and hatred in your heart, then you die not fully human, not complete as God intended you to be, but a monstrosity of half animal caught up in the image of God.

Does this mean we must place ourselves in situations over and over and over again where we KNOW we will be mistreated? NO!

Remember Jesus early in His ministry “slipped through the crowd” to safety when they sought to stone HIM. So it is perfectly all right to avoid situations where you know you will be threatened with further harm, but STILL, the effort at making peace must

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

continue at a later date for those who call you enemy will NOT seek peace. Those of us who call ourselves children of God MUST at least TRY to be the peacemakers. Making peace, like forgiving, is unnatural in itself, and requires a soul and a faith connected to God. By yourself, you won't even desire, much less, be able to bring about peace!

It doesn't mean you pretend NOT to have hurt and anger! If you deny you HAVE the feelings, how are you ever going to get over them? Feel your pain. As Paul says, “Be angry, but sin not.” Go to the next step as faithful people, and seek peace with God's help. Forgive with God's help. Without God's help, you cannot do either. If we get stuck in anger, then on the MAP of our soul, we know we have taken a turn AWAY from God. Anger is a dead end, a wrong turn.

A PSALM WHEN PARDON IS IMPOSSIBLE

It feels impossible, O God, totally beyond my reach, to forgive what has been done to me. You know my pain; you know the hurt I hold.

Surely, you, O God, who in a moment of anger, swept away all the earth in one great flood, leaving old Noah and his boatload of refugees safe from your rain soaked rage, surely you know the storm within my heart.

But I'm doubly caught in this bind, snagged on the sacred fence of my friendship with your son, Jesus, who has told me that I must forgive, seven times seventy, those who injure me, who cause me pain.

Caught between pain and pardon, I wish to choose the way of pardon. Nailed by pain to His cross, covered by the spit of scorners and whipped by His torturers, He prayed the impossible prayer. This prayer is one I now desire to make mine: “Father, forgive him, her, them, for they know not what they do.”

O Infinite Sea of Mercy, make this unworthy servant the channel of your gift of pardon, that I also may be healed.

Injustice, unfairness, enemies? You can count on it in this world. Jesus knows all about it! And He stands ready to help you through it to the other side, to the place beyond animal revenge to a place of still water and green pastures and peace. The place where He, the Good Shepherd, leads us. The place where He, the Shepherd, gave His life to lead us.

Have you refused to forgive someone? Well, it's only natural. I can understand it, but I'm not sure God will.

God's will is clear. Love God, love others as you love self, and love MEANS WILLING and WORKING for the GOOD of another. Christian love is not a mushy feeling. It is WILLING and WORKING for the GOOD of another.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 11, 2005

Translation – forgive, as you would like to be forgiven. Or, from God’s point of view, forgive as you have already BEEN forgiven. It is clear. It is called for. It is a Christian Life assignment. It is what we do, to be who we are. Not optional.

Forgiveness is a WAY in which we grow and show others that LOVE is possible. Think of this, WHEN WE FORGIVE, WE MUST PRAY FOR THE POWER TO DO SO and thereby GROW! At the same time, the very act of forgiving another enhances the spiritual growth of THAT person because they just SAW IN YOU that true love is POSSIBLE!!!! By your forgiveness, they may see real love for the very first time.

Breaking the pattern of a lifetime of retaliation and walls. We talk about witness – THAT IS A WITNESS! When you keep a grudge, and allow bitterness to grow, and wear a thin skin looking for offense, THAT is another kind of witness.

Apart or together, broken or whole, lost or saved, all these concepts are wrapped up in the words describing what GOD has done for us in Jesus Christ. Salvation, healing, wholeness – God ACTING, WILLING, DOING the “Good” for us.

This parable says “Don’t you DARE call yourself a child of God, and do less for others than God has done for you.”

Forgiveness is necessary for healing to take place. Your life cannot become whole in God’s kingdom without it. Yes, it is very difficult to understand, and even more difficult, to practice as a way of life, but it is essential for you to become a whole person in God’s kingdom.

With forgiveness as our tool, and the Holy Spirit as our guide and power, we journey toward the goal of true perception. Life as God intended.

With forgiveness as the ACTIVE ACT OF LOVING AND WILLING AND DOING FOR ANOTHER, peace is possible! And, not one second before!

God help me! God help us. Know what God has done in Jesus Christ, and pass it on to others. Amen.