

BUILDING BRIDGES

Genesis 45:1-15 (Joseph is forgives his brothers)

Ephesians 4: 26-32 (Paul's advice on how to forgive and love each other)

Luke 15: 11-20a (The parable of the prodigal son)

Children's time

Have a dry sponge and bucket of water.

Notice how light the sponge is.

Sometimes when someone when hurts us, we hold onto that hurt (get sponge wet)

Sometimes we begin to gossip about that person and spread rumors (get sponge wet)

Sometimes we avoid that person or don't talk to that person (get sponge wet)

Sometimes we try to find ways to get them back (get sponge wet)

Q: But what has happened to the sponge? ANS: it is heavy.

Just like we when we hold the hurt inside of us and don't forgive the person who hurt us – the pain of not forgiving weighs us down. It hurts us.

Q: If we wring the sponge out what happens? (Wring it out) ANS: The water all goes away and it is light again.

If we forgive others, then we too will have a lighter heart, we will be happier, and we will be able to live in peace like Christ wants us to.

Sermon

Old Joe and the Carpenter (From Peace Tales Edited by Margaret Read MacDonald)

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor. They'd been friends all their lives. It seemed that they had grown old together. And now that their spouses were dead and buried and their children raised and living lives of their own in other places, all they both had left were their farms ... and each other.

But for the first time in their long relationship, they'd had an argument. And it was a silly argument. It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed. It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe's neighbor's land and so he claimed it as his own. But Old Joe said, "no, no, now that calf has the same markings as my favorite cow, and I recognize it as being mine."

Well, they were both a bit stubborn, so the upshot of it was they just stopped talking to each other. These two men, who had spoken to each other for every day for as long as they could remember, they just stopped talking to each other. For days and days, then a week – then two or three, they just stopped talking to each other.

About a month passed and it seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe ... when there came a knock on his door. He was in his kitchen drinking coffee and Old Joe wasn't expecting anybody that day. He cautiously opened the door, and he saw standing before him a young man who had a box of wooden tools on his shoulder. Old Joe knew most the folks from around the town, but he didn't recognize him. The stranger had rather dark, deep eyes, and he smiled at Old Joe. The he spoke in a kind voice and said. "I'm a carpenter, and I'm looking for a bit of work. I thought that maybe you'd have some small jobs here and there that I can help with?"

Now Old Joe wasn't the kind of fellow to take someone on just right on the spot, so he brought him on into the kitchen and sat him down. He gave him some stew that he had on the back stove. There was some homemade bread, baked fresh that morning, and some fresh churned butter and homemade jam. And while they sat there eating and talking, Old Joe decided that he liked this young man. So he said to the stranger, "I do have a job for you actually. Look right there through my kitchen window. See that farm over across the way? That's my neighbor's place. And you see that crick running right down there between our property lines? That crick, it wasn't there last week. My neighbor made it to spit me, darn it. He took his plow up there with a tractor, and he just dug a big old furrow from the upper pond and then he flooded it! Well, two of us can play that game! I'm gonna do one better. Since he wants us divided that way, you can go out there and build me a fence – a big, tall fence – so I won't even have to see his place no more. That'll show him!

And the stranger said, "Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I've got the tools, and I will be able to do a job that you'll like."

So, Old Joe took the carpenter to the barn and showed him where everything was that he needed. The carpenter took the lumber and began to move it down to the crick, while Old Joe hitched up the wagon – he needed to go to town to get some supplies, so he left the carpenter to do his work. And, oh, his work went smooth and fast. He did his measuring, and his sawing and his nailing. He was a very good carpenter, and he just about finished by sunset, as Old Joe returned from town. When Old Joe pulled up in the wagon, his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open ... because there wasn't a fence there at all. It was a bridge. Going from one side of the crick to the other was a bridge with handrails and all. It was a fine piece of work. Old Joe was just about to curse or swear to the carpenter, when he saw that his neighbor was starting to cross the other side of that bridge with his hand stuck out, and he was saying, "Old Joe, you're quite the fellow to build this bridge. I'd a never been able to do that. I'm so glad that we're going to be friends again!" Old Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor and he said, "Oh that calf is yours. I've known it all the time. I just want to be your friend, too."

Quietly in the background, the carpenter began putting his tools back into the box and hoisted it back onto his shoulder, and he started to walk away. Old Joe called after him, "No, now wait, come back young fellow. I want you to stay on. I've got lots of projects for you."

The carpenter just smiled, he looked at Old Joe and said, "I'd like to stay on Joe, but you see, I can't. I've got more bridges to build."

I am sure that each of us can identify with Old Joe. For all of us, there has probably been a time when we feel that someone has wronged us; when we feel like we've been stabbed in the back; maybe we've had someone say unkind words about us; or perhaps we've been called names to our faces. Sometimes, like Old Joe, it may come from someone that we thought of as a friend, someone we thought we could trust. But this feeling of hurt and betrayal is not new. From our reading in Genesis this morning, we hear about Joseph – now this is a man who was definitely hurt by someone he thought he could trust – his own brothers! They striped him, beat him up, and left him to die in a pit. Joseph most definitely had good reason to feel hurt, betrayed, and full of desire to get revenge!

And revenge and resentment is sadly a natural instinct. But if we hold onto these feeling of anger, bitterness, or even vengeance, then we might be the ones who pay most dearly. Studies have shown, that when our lives become so wrapped up in the wrong that was done to us, then we find ourselves unable to move forward, to enjoy the present and to live in the now. Like the sponge weighted down with water, we hold onto the past hurts. The negative feelings begin to outweigh the positive, and we become swallowed up in bitterness or by own sense of injustice. It can be a cause of depression, anxiety, alcoholism and in some cases, even suicide. But as Christians, the problem is that holding onto those feelings and desire for resentments, means that we are also at odds with our spiritual beliefs.

Jesus made it very clear to us about how we as Christians should react when we are hurt by others. He called it “being sinned against” and he taught us that *“we should forgive those that sin against us”* Jesus tells us that we should *“love our enemies”* (Luke 6:27 & 35) And Paul writes to the Ephesians that *“we should get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger. be kind to one another and forgive each other.”* But like the mother of the Prodigal Son said “it is very hard to forgive.”

My mother was like that figure. I don't know why, but for some reason she could not forgive my brother for leaving home as a teenager. Even in later life when my brother tried to reach out to her, my mother was so filled with anger and bitterness, that she was unable to forgive him. I watched as her inability to forgive hurt her more and more. It destroyed my mother so much, that she was not able to bring herself to attend my brother's funeral. I learned firsthand how a lack of forgiveness can destroy a family, can destroy relationships, can stop people from moving forward, but ultimately the one it hurts the most in the end, is the one who will not forgive.

Now we could look at all the different self-help books about why forgiveness is hard. I could quote you guidelines and rules on ways to forgive others – but really it is very simple. The Bible tells us that

“we must forgive others just as Christ God forgave us.”

The question of course arises: are some people's crimes so heinous that they don't merit forgiveness? Parents who've abused children? Children who've rebelled against parents? Spouses who've abandoned or cheated on their partners? Friends who've betrayed us? Strangers who have harmed us or our loved ones? Or in some countries, tyrants who've killed whole families? Think of the events in Syria and Yemen and many other places in the world.

It is very hard to forgive.

And I am not suggesting that we should stay silent as atrocities happen around us, or as we are hurt by others. No. As Christians we should speak up when we are hurt. Paul tells us that we should speak truthfully to our neighbor and that *we should not let the sun go down while we are still angry.* (Eph 4:25) But the challenge is that our words should come from a place of kindness. As Paul says,

“We should be kind and compassionate to one another” (Eph 4: 32)

We should reach out to the one that has hurt us and tell them that we forgive them. We shouldn't reach out with an expectation that they will seek forgiveness from us. Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. When we forgive, however, it does set **us** free. It enables **us** to live in peace with ourselves and with each other. It shows that we can *“love one another, as Christ has loved us”*.

Yes, forgiveness is hard. But as you leave here today, reflect on who you need to forgive. Reach out to that person in love, just like Joseph did to his brothers, like the Father did to his lost Prodigal son, like Old Joe did to his neighbor. Go and build bridges. It may be hard, but don't be afraid, Christ will help you. And through forgiving others, Christ **can** give you the peace that you deserve. As Nelson Mandela said:

Courageous people do not fear forgiving, for the sake of peace.