

Streetsville United Church  
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Rev. John Tapscott

“A COMMUNITY OF FORGIVENESS”

John 20:19-23

The first part of John 20:19 reads “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews...” No doubt the disciples were afraid of the religious authorities. But one Christian writer suggests that it was not the authorities the disciples feared most, but Jesus. And perhaps so. Hours before his death, they’d all professed that they would never leave him. They were even willing to die with him. But with Jesus now risen, what would he say and do to them? Would he say, “So you were going to stand by me, eh? What about you John and James? You always wanted to be one on my right hand and one on my left. Where were you when I was being beaten, when I was carrying the Cross towards Golgotha, when I was crucified?” And to Peter, “I heard you deny me, and I heard that rooster crow.” Would he be angry with them, scatter them, and find more faithful followers? They couldn’t blame him. How would they explain themselves to him? How could they stand before Him? So they hid behind locked doors, in fear of Jesus.

But John goes on in verse 19 to tell us that suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were no longer afraid, but glad. No rebuking, no harsh words of judgement. Just “Peace be with you.” And not just once, but twice. Imagine the sense of relief the disciples must have felt. And rather than scattering them, Jesus commissioned them again. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus had forgiven the disciples and restored them to fellowship with himself, and service for his sake. Then he added, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (20:23)

In fact, what Jesus said and did for the disciples that night is really a model of what he came to do for us all. Jesus came to form a community of forgiven and forgiving people.

*First, Jesus came to form a community of forgiven people.*

That’s who we are. We have received the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ. One day, as we heard the Gospel proclaimed, we sensed the depth of our sin and our separation from God. Then in response to the Gospel invitation we turned in faith to the crucified and risen One. God reached out to us and brought us back to himself, ransomed, healed, restored,

forgiven. Peace came to us, peace with God and peace within ourselves. Notice that Jesus showed the disciples his wounded hands and his side. The wounds of Jesus and the blood that was shed guarantee the reality of our forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ we have been drawn into a community of people who are forgiven by God and restored people to fellowship with him, now and for eternity.

Rev. Clarke MacDonald, a former moderator of the United Church tells this story in his book, "Don't Stop the World." It happened one Saturday afternoon when Clarke was eight years old, growing up on a farm in Nova Scotia. His father was away at market, so Clarke decided to pass the time by making a wooden cart. He went into his Father's toolshed and began. There was one tool that his father had told him never to use, a wooden mitre box used for cutting wood at different angles. But Clarke did use it, and while he was using it, he dropped it and broke it. He carefully put the broken piece back in place, thinking maybe he could tell his father he had found it like that. But deep inside he knew he couldn't do that. When his father arrived home, Clarke went out to help him unload the wagon. After some small talk, Clarke blurted out what he had done. There was a long silence. Clarke expected the worst. But then to Clarke's surprise his dad put his arm around Clarke's shoulder. Together they walked towards the house where a light shone in the window. Clarke's father said, "I am very sorry you did that, especially when I told you not to. That tool came in mighty handy. But I'll tell you what. Tomorrow we'll go to the shed and you can help me build a new one." Clarke MacDonald writes that the relationship of father to son and son to father never felt more secure. Forgiveness had been given and received and Clarke never forgot the joy of the moment. It became for him a starting point for understanding God's forgiveness of us.

So it is. Jesus came to form a community of forgiven people, a community in which sin is acknowledged before God and forgiven by God, a community in which God himself bears our sin in the death of his Son, a community in which we are loved and restored and given a second chance, a community in which we are not so much frightened into confession and repentance, but loved into it. It was true for the disciples and it's true for us.

*Secondly, Jesus came to form a community of forgiving people.*

In verse 23 Jesus says "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The church has sometimes stumbled over this verse, as if Jesus was giving the church the power to give or withhold God's forgiveness. Of course, the church can declare God's forgiveness in the name of Jesus to those who confess their sin. But the actual forgiveness of sins against God is given by God himself.

What Jesus is talking about here is forgiving one another within the Christian community.

He's telling us not to hold on to one another's sins but to forgive one another as we have been forgiven.

Now the first objection people raise about forgiveness is this, "Reverend, if someone were to murder my child or hurt my family, how could I possibly be expected to forgive that person." Well, those are awful things, and require special grace to forgive. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is talking about forgiving our brothers and sisters in Christ, not retaining their sins, but putting them in the garbage bin, not the recycling bin, but the garbage bin, so that they will be buried once and for all. For if you don't forgive someone, it's not only that person who retains the sin. To an even greater degree, it's you. If have an unforgiving spirit towards a fellow Christian, you are the one who retains the sin. People sometimes walk around wearing bitterness on their sleeve, eager to share with others about so and so has done to them. Well, guess what. To a large degree, others really don't care. So you are the one who winds up being hurt the most when you refuse to forgive. Someone has said, "One of the most deadly things you can do to yourself is to be unforgiving."

A Christian woman had been treated badly by another church member. For six years, she nursed her grudge and schemed to get even. But now she was tired all the time and her face wore a mask of bitterness. She was negative and hyper-critical. Her pastor suggested she forgive her debtor as God had forgiven her. Finally the woman decided, "Well, I'll forgive her as you suggest, but I don't want anything more to do with her!" The pastor asked, "Is that how you'd like God to forgive you - to pardon you, but then have nothing more to do with you?" She saw the point, and forgiveness flowed and this woman's withered spirit began to live and grow in Christ once more.

When we retain someone's sin, we are really hurting ourselves. Now forgiving someone can be a real relief to that person, because they may be longing for your forgiveness, but it's an even greater relief to you. You bless them and you bless yourself and you can both get on with the business of being a Christ-follower.

Look, ministers need forgiveness, too. Churches are not perfect, and neither are pastors. Tempers flare, words are spoken, disagreements erupt. I have said some things I shouldn't have said and done some things I shouldn't have done, and I am sorry. To those of you who feel wronged by something I have done or said, I hope you will forgive me. And if some have hurt me in some way, I am more than willing to forgive and to be reconciled. Jesus forgives us so that we can be a forgiving community. When you know yourself to be forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, how can you have an unforgiving spirit? When you know your own need for God's mercy, how can you not be merciful to another?

And we don't forgive on our own; we forgive by relying on God's help. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said, which is God's presence and power dwelling within believers and enabling us to forgive one another. Jesus came to form a community of forgiven and forgiving people. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained." So the obvious action step is to forgive.

*Finally, let's realize that in the community of forgiven and forgiving people we have permission to forgive ourselves.*

Even after we've received God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ and even after we've been generous in forgiving others, we may still find it hard to forgive ourselves. We may wake up in the night haunted by the wrongs we did to others. Of course, looking back we would do things differently. We have more experience and maturity now than we did then. Life is lived forward, but it's understood backwards. Sometimes we just don't know why we did the things we did. We can only chalk it up to the old sin virus which resides in every one of us. As Paul put it, "For some reason I do the things I don't want to do and don't do the things I should do." But David says this in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever." The mercy of God follows us all our days like a vacuum cleaner to sweep up all our sins. And if you've received God's forgiveness and if you've tried to set things right with others, then take the final step of forgiving yourself. Pull the thorn out of your heart and mind. Don't deny yourself the new beginning God is giving you. Peter and James and John and the rest received the gift of a new opportunity from Jesus. They learned from their experience and moved forward into a new day. And so can we.