

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Talking Points – Forgiveness

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements

Friends, good morning! Welcome to worship. Today is Sunday, October 25th, which is Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday is always the last Sunday in October, and on this special day we remember the fact that Martin Luther, on October 31st, 1517, nailed the 95 theses to the church doors in Wittenberg. This single act started a reformation in the church and a focus on different aspects of belief. One of the things Martin Luther is known for is he also went and translated the New Testament into German, making the Bible more accessible to all.

On Reformation Sunday it is the tradition within this church that we show the Bible is accessible to all as we present children's bibles to our second graders, and you'll see this later in our service this morning.

But before we begin let me first share with you a few of the special events coming up in the life of our congregation. This coming Thursday, October 29th, between 7:00 and 8:30, we're having an important discussion within our congregation. We are having an open learning format on the subject of racism and reconciliation. Together we will watch a video through Zoom and then we'll have a chance for open discussion. I hope you will join us.

As Christians we wrestle with how we respond to some of the hard hitting issues of our day. That Zoom link can be found on our church website, which will allow you to join in the discussion, on Thursday at 7:00, or you can find it in our Friday email.

Friends, I want you to prepare also for next Sunday, November 1st--one of my favorite Sundays of the year, because God gifts us with an extra hour of sleep! Daylight savings ends, but if that extra hour is not enough to wake you up, we also have bagpipes at both our online and live in-person parking lot service at 10:00 AM. Yes, that's right! It's Saint Andrew Sunday, and our bagpiper will be at all services. We hope you will join us for this.

I also hope you'll join us for November 8th, another special and very significant service in the life of our church. On Sunday, November 8, Ashley Smith Ashley will be preaching, both live in the parking lot service and online, as our candidate for our Associate Pastor position. We hope, as members, you will not only listen, but you will take the chance to vote on the future of leadership in our church by joining in the Zoom congregational vote at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, November 8th. You need to first register in order to be able to vote and all the information you need about how to register was sent to your home, but it is also available online. There are also practice sessions this Sunday, October 25th and next Sunday, November 1st, to help you feel familiar with this voting process.

Friends, this morning I'm extremely grateful to those helping to lead our worship service. Doug Kee is here serving as our liturgist. Darlene McGinley is our children's ministry director and she's presenting Bibles and speaking to our children. Our music is a wonderful mix of our chancel choir and the musical talent of Ben and Kylie Fisher. Now Kylie Phillips Fisher is Jeff Phillips' daughter. We are blessed to have them here leading

worship today. I want to give my deepest thanks to Susan Underhill for bringing the many elements of this service together.

Doug Kee – Opening Prayer

Good morning. Would you please pray with me.

We praise you, dear God, on this Reformation Sunday for your power and love. For your faithfulness, for your gift of fellowship, we thank you and offer up our praise and our prayers in response. We recognize, dear Lord, that it is by grace alone that you call us into your service. Please forgive us for all the times when we have failed to listen and failed to respond to your call upon our lives. Please forgive us for those times when our personal priorities have taken precedent over your priorities. We thank you for the forgiveness brought to us through your life, death, and resurrection. We know that we do not deserve this gift of grace, but we claim it as our own as children of God. Please receive our praise and our prayers this morning. We ask in your most precious name. Amen

Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry – Presentation of Bibles and Message [Note: this message has been shortened]

This is a special Sunday in our church. Every year on Reformation Sunday we give all of the second-grade students in the Church a Bible. Now normally the way we do that is we have a very special service in the sanctuary, and we call the kids up and give them their Bible, and Pastor Emily reads their names. This year, like everything else, we had to do it a little bit differently, so this past week I went to the houses of five second grade kids who are getting bibles and I gave them a Bible on behalf of the church as part of their faith journey.

As members of First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth we promise, upon baptizing a child, that we will nurture them on their faith journey. Giving Bibles each year to our second-grade children is one step we take to fulfill that promise. This year, on Reformation Sunday, we presented bibles to Bianca Jane Carlson, Eva Valentine Geiseman, Katherine Jennifer Ray, Quentin Arthur Renaldi, and Cora Jean Thomey.

Bianca, Eva, Katherine, Quentin and Cora, you are children of God and may He bless you on your faith journey with grace, peace and understanding. God gave us the words in the Bible so that we could get to know him and so that he could spend time with us. So here's what I suggest that you do. We're going to take our Bibles off the shelves every single day and we're going to open up the Bible and we're going to read for maybe five minutes or a chapter in the Bible or even a few verses in the Bible. The secret is, if you take out the Bible and you read a little bit every day, before long you are going to start understanding what's in the Bible and it will start to make sense to you. The Bible has 1189 chapters, and it has 23,214 verses. All of those chapters and all of those verses point to one single truth and that truth can be summed up in one verse in the Bible, John 3:16. John 3:16 says, ““For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

So today we gave the gift of Bibles to our second-grade students and giving gifts is a great thing. So, we can give gifts to other kids around the world who don't have access to all of the things that we have, Operation Christmas Child is coming up again this year where we can pick up a shoe box from the church and we can fill it with toys and treasures for some special boy or girl to receive in another country, around the world.

Doug Kee – Reading of Scripture

Colossians 3:12-17, New Revised Standard Version

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Matthew 18:21-22, New Revised Standard Version

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Loving Lord, we struggle at times to live out your word and we need your help and guidance. Please teach us today what it means to live as your disciples. Unlock your word to us and by the power of your Holy Spirit work within us so that we may reflect your forgiveness and grace. This we pray in your most precious name. Amen.

Friends, our words matter! How we talk to each other matters. We can choose to talk to each other in a way that builds one another up or potentially tears each other down. Our choice of words is important not only to the recipient of those words, but our choice of words is important to the One who *is* the Word, to the one who is also described as the way and the truth and the life. Ann Voskamp writes, "Ours is a God who wields words and by the word of His mouth alone, the universe black splits, cells divide, light sparks, mountains rise, and oceans come so far and no farther."

With his words God created the world and it was good. But then we're told in the New Testament that God's Word became a living word in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the forgiveness and grace offered to us all. I wonder if the words of our lives today, the words that come out of our mouths, reflect the forgiveness that has been offered to each of us. Luke chapter 6, at verse 45, says this, "...for it is out of the abundance of our hearts, our mouths speak." In other words, our words reflect the condition of our hearts and I wonder what do our words say about the state of our hearts today?

Philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal once wrote, "Cold words freeze people, hot words scorch them, bitter words make them bitter, and wrathful words make them wrathful." I wonder what power do words of forgiveness hold. Talking in a forgiving manner is a bit like our discussion last week of talking in gentleness. We fear appearing weak if we approach every conversation with a forgiving heart and attitude. Does that mean that ultimately we turn a blind eye to every offense and simply become a doormat

to others, inviting hurt into our lives? Of course not! The call to forgive is not a call to allow people to walk all over you, but it is a call to be an agent of God's love and grace.

The issue of forgiveness is never an issue that we can run from or try to hide from. The theme of God's forgiveness can be traced throughout the whole of scripture. Jesus Christ, as I've already said, is the embodiment of forgiveness and grace. How we respond to God's love and forgiveness offered to us in the person of Jesus Christ is ultimately one of the greatest questions of our lives, because it influences not only our relationship with God, but our relationship with every person. The mercy we have received from God is the mercy that we also share, but the question we have to ask ourselves today is how many times are we called to forgive the people in our lives who have hurt us? I have to admit there is a real part of me that likes the traditional Jewish answer to this question in biblical times. You see, the traditional rabbinic teaching on the subject of forgiveness was that a person was required to forgive three times for the same offense but if that offense occurred a fourth time you did not need to forgive. Now this wisdom was gleaned out of the Old Testament book of Amos where God himself forgives the nations not three times but four times. It was believed that God was ultimately more forgiving than man, so if God forgave four times and then brought judgment, then man would only be required to forgive three times.

Yet this clearly was not the practice of Jesus Christ, and the Apostle Peter understood this truth. How many times, says Peter, shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Peter knew this number would be greater than three. So what he did is he took that traditional teaching number of three, he doubled it, added one more for good measure and he came up with the answer of seven. Should I forgive my brother seven times? Peter expected that this would be a very wise answer, that would be met with praise, but Jesus' answer is shocking. He says that a Christian must forgive 70 times 7! In other words, there's no recognizable limit to forgiveness. But where does that leave us today? Well, it should leave us grateful, first and foremost, that God doesn't count our sins against us. If God would release us from his favor after we had committed the same sin four times most of us, myself included, would definitely be outside of God's love and grace. Rather, God is gracious to us, abounding in love, and we have the opportunity to practice forgiveness every day, recognizing that our own forgiveness toward others comes out of the deep mercy that we first have received from God. Colossians chapter 3 puts it like this, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you", and expands on this idea in that chapter, saying God's chosen people that are holy and dearly loved should be known for their compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. These virtues that are reflected in the person of Jesus Christ should also be reflected in our lives, in our hearts and in our words.

Let me say this: As we try to speak words of forgiveness to one another, we must practice, practice, and practice, because this does not come naturally to us. Yet we are called to live our lives in a way that reflects the love and forgiveness of God at work within us.

The Hebrew word 'cheched' is actually the word for mercy and that word helps us to understand a little bit about what forgiveness should be like in our lives. That word cheched means to get inside someone's skin, to look at their viewpoint of life, to feel what they are experiencing, to move in, and act upon, or on behalf of, the one hurting. It is--if you like empathy in the extreme, that's what Jesus did. When he came out of heaven to earth to live a human life he took on our eyes, our perspective, and felt what we felt, and became empathetic to us in the extreme. We can learn how to be forgiving by learning to

see things through other people's perspectives, to grow in patience and in kindness, to be slow to anger, and abounding in love.

We ask God for help in relying on God's grace to lead us into mercy for small offenses in life. but we also are called to let go of the bitterness, the grudges, the entitlement of pain, the anger, that comes from larger, deeper offenses. Pastor and author Richard Rohr is right when he says that if you don't transform your pain you will transmit it. God alone can transform our deepest pain into a place of grace. This is not a quick process or an easy process. This is not a process free from sadness or pain, but ultimately it is a liberating process, because it begins with turning our issues and our pain over to God, praying that God helps us to forgive the deep wounds in our lives, and praying that God teaches us what that forgiveness means.

Forgiveness does not mean that we invite people back into our lives who have hurt us deeply so that they can hurt us again. It doesn't even mean that we condone past behavior. It means that we are willing to allow God to heal our hearts; we are willing to pray for the people who have hurt us. It means that we wish them peace, even if they cannot be in our lives. This is how we practice forgiveness. We ask for God's help every single day. We ask for God's help with dealing with smaller offenses, praying again we grow in patience, kindness, gentleness, and grace. We rely on God's help and healing and grace as we deal with pain and hurt, turning it completely over to God.

How well we do this will ultimately be reflected in our words and actions, which brings us full circle today, because our words do matter. They can speak of God's grace at work within us or they can reflect the darkness and the pain and the bitterness found in our hearts. Forgiveness starts with understanding just how much grace has been offered to us by God. Max Lucado in his book, simply entitled "Grace," wrote that if we were to understand how much forgiveness is on offer to us then we would not offer it to others in increments of teaspoons, but in buckets!

Friends, it is my prayer today that our words and actions would ultimately reflect not only our own heart but God's heart. May God help us to both receive and give forgiveness today and always. Amen.

Doug Kee — Prayers of the People

Please pray with me. Holy and merciful God, as we humbly approach the throne of grace this morning our hearts are filled with many concerns and joys. We thank you Lord for this day and for this time to worship you together. We thank you for every member of this community and for each new visitor among us, even during this pandemic. We are determined to safely come together as your people to praise you and share our prayers and petitions in your presence. Hear our praises, Lord, during these difficult times for so many. We give thanks to those who tirelessly serve our neighbors in need. We pray for the well-being and resilient spirit of first responders, military, health care workers, teachers, pastors, and all those serving others in so many capacities. We thank you especially today for your new call on the heart of Ashley Smith Ashley to serve FPCP. Give her and all servant leaders wisdom, love, and dedication to care for your people. We lift up prayers today for all who are ill, for those grieving the loss of loved ones, for parents, grandparents and caregivers struggling to juggle work and family duties, for students trying to learn in difficult conditions, for those searching for work, and for those desperate to secure life's basic necessities. Lord, hear our prayers. We come to you, dear Lord, in this season of great anxiety and division, in need of a word from you to ease

our fear, anger, and frustration during these difficult days. We know you sent Christ to teach us and then to sacrifice himself for us even while we remain sinners. Inspire us and empower us now to love you and to love all our neighbors. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, change our hearts so we can heal the divisions which separate us from you and from one another. We pray your justice prevails in our land. Lord, hear our cries for peace, healing and reconciliation. And hear us now as we join in the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, saying together, Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Blessing and Benediction

Let us go from here today open to receiving the forgiveness of God and also extending that same forgiveness to others. And as we go, may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.