

FORGIVENESS IS UNCONVENTIONAL!

Text: Mt. 18:15-20

Last week the Democrats held their national convention in Denver and this week the Republicans will meet in St. Paul, MN. The candidates spend a lot of time building themselves up and tearing down their opponents before an audience of millions. And they're just warming up – we've got presidential and vice presidential debates coming up, and all those TV campaign ads in which they blast away at each other. Don't get me wrong, debating the issues openly is one of our country's greatest political assets. But it always seems that somewhere a line is crossed, and the attacks become personal.

After the election is over, we're all supposed to put aside our differences and come together as one. Tell me, how well does that work in your life? How easy is it to set aside your grudges against family members, coworkers, even fellow church members? While a two-party political system may be necessary for running our country, God wants his house to be united. He doesn't need big rallies with balloons, confetti and fireworks to do that. God brings us together with his forgiveness – forgiveness which is unconventional!

1. Forgiveness involves everyone

The final night of the Democratic convention was held at a football stadium and was open to the public, regardless of party affiliation. There wasn't an open mic at the speakers' podium, however. The only people who are allowed to speak at political events are supporters of the party's candidate. Politics in this country divides people into "winners" and "losers."

But God's forgiveness is a win-win situation. His forgiveness involves everyone. That's because everyone sins. It's not a question of "if" someone will sin against you, but rather "when." We shrug off some offenses against us pretty easily, like when our children "forget" to do the dishes. Other sins however bury themselves into our hearts and suck the joy out of every moment of the day, like the memory of a spouse's unfaithfulness or a dishonest coworker who cost us our job.

Every one of us has been offended by someone else's sins. But by the same token, every one of us has also given offense, we have stepped on feelings and broken promises, sometimes knowingly, sometimes without being aware of it. And we have all offended God. In our walk and in our talk, how many times haven't we told him, "I don't need you. I don't care what you say, I'm going to do it my way."

We might be able to put up with others' antics for awhile, but eventually the levees burst and our anger swamps us. What do you think God does? He doesn't "put up" with sin, hoping it will go away if he ignores it long enough. God's wrath will nuke our world clean of its wickedness and defiance on the Last Day. But there's something else he did first. God sent his Son Jesus into our world to rescue us. He didn't wait for our human race to improve itself, to rise above our nature, because that wasn't going to happen. Instead, he reached out to us through his Son, who not only said nice things about forgiveness, but showed he meant it by dying on the cross for us.

Because everyone sins, God's forgiveness involves everyone. That makes every one of us involved in forgiving others. In the words of Matthew 18 Jesus makes us personally responsible for one another. He says, "if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." "Go" means "Don't just sit there stewing about it, get off your duff and do something!" If something's going to change between me and another person, I can't wait for the other person to make the first move. The change has to start right here in my heart. I've got to reach out to that person, just like God reached out to me.

I and only I am responsible for showing my brother his sin. Nobody else needs to know about it. What good will it do to complain to my spouse or my friend about this guy? I'm just avoiding my God-given responsibility. So I go and talk to him – alone, and I tell him that he has not only offended me, he has also offended God.

And if he doesn't listen to me, I'm not done with my job. What if Jesus had given up the first or second time someone ignored him? Jesus says, "take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I am responsible for finding another person or two to come along with me, not just people to take my side, but people with a mature faith who want to get to the bottom of the story. In the Old Testament, God designated a handful of cities as places of refuge. That's because justice in those days was sometimes like in the American Old West – they settled disputes on the street rather than in the courtroom. If you killed someone by accident in the Old Testament times, and that person's relatives were coming after you for vengeance, you could escape to a city of refuge. But just in case someone was really guilty and was trying to hide, you had to have 2-3 witnesses with you so there would be no doubt about your innocence. And so Jesus wants us to be perfectly clear that someone has really sinned against us. When you're in the middle of a personal dispute with someone it's pretty hard to be objective, isn't it? Hard to see if perhaps we've added some fuel to the fire. But our fellow Christians can hold up a mirror to us just as easily as they can to the one who sinned against us, can't they?

And if this person still doesn't listen Jesus says, "Tell it to the church." In other words, make everyone responsible. Why? Because this person's guilty of sinning against everyone. That doesn't mean we gossip about the person's problems behind his back, it doesn't mean we gang up on him, or drive him out of the church. We confront him in love, because we are all responsible. And we are not to ignore it either. This unrepentant attitude will affect everyone, it will spread like yeast in dough.

Even though you call me "Pastor," my unofficial title is "Sanitation Engineer." When you're the pastor, everyone brings their garbage and dumps it. And I have directed people back to Jesus' words here in Matthew 18 and reminded them to go and talk to whoever it is that's driving them up the wall. I am not here to judge who's right and who's wrong – do you see a black robe and a gavel? I have been involved in many cases of church discipline but let me tell you when you involve the pastor and the church, it ratchets up the pressure and pushes people into a corner. Before you come into my office to ask for help, ask yourself "Have I done everything I could to resolve things with this person? Have I given him enough time? Am I part of the problem?" And if you have reached the end of your rope, then you can be sure that your brothers and sisters in the church will back you up, because we are all responsible.

2. It unites adversaries

There is no room in our church for divisions and political factions. If fierce political rivals can come together for an election, isn't it even more important for Christians to be united and stand firm against Satan's attacks? There is nothing more important than saving our brother's soul. Jesus said to leave the 99 sheep in the pen and go after the one that wandered off. That's why we can't turn a blind eye to sin. This is why we go through these painfully slow steps of church discipline. No matter how angry we might be at someone, no matter how painfully he has wounded us, Jesus shed the same amount of blood for his soul as he did for ours.

And when he realizes what he has done, God's unconventional forgiveness will unite us. Jesus says, "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." If God has opened the door of heaven to this person, how can we lock our hearts against him? How can we keep reminding him of his guilt, of the pain he caused us? God's forgiveness doesn't just lighten the load of the one who sinned against, it lightens our load too, doesn't it? I can't imagine how hard it was for Hillary Clinton to stand before her delegates and tell them to support her opponent. But forgiveness doesn't make us sacrifice our principles or swallow our pride. The only thing we're giving up is our pain.

But if in spite of all our efforts to win back this person he still does not listen, then Jesus says to "treat him like a pagan or a tax collector." The Apostle Paul calls it "handing someone over to Satan". It's also been called "excommunication." What does that mean practically? It means this person is not allowed to take communion, because what good is it to tell someone that they are forgiven when they are unrepentant? But excommunication is also a witness for the truth. Excommunication is a public statement that that this person has stepped outside of the kingdom of God and will remain so as long as he does not repent. As Jesus says, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven," in other words, heaven's doors are locked shut to him.

If we cannot be united with him then we must stand firm with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and follow through on this step of church discipline. Jesus says, "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." In reality, this isn't a decision of just two or three people, but the whole church has to come together. That takes time, just like it takes time for the members of a symphony to warm up before a performance, but sooner or later the congregation must speak with one voice. When a church excommunicates a member it must be united, not only in the decision, but also in the purpose. Because ultimately we want to save this person's soul, we are united in love.

And God is united with us. Jesus says, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." It's a hard thing for us to understand. Some churches have abandoned their responsibility, saying that only God can forgive or condemn sinners, because only he knows what's going on inside a person's heart. Other churches have abused their authority and cast people out of the church for what I'd call political reasons. Where is the truth? Our church council has given me a key that can open any door in this church, but it only works if I put it in the lock and turn it. I can't use it to pry open the door, or cut through the glass and metal, or slide it between the doorknob and the strike plate. So also God has given us the power to open the door of heaven for repentant sinners by forgiving them, and to close that door for the unrepentant by not forgiving them. It doesn't work any other way.

People complain about church politics all the time. Sometimes they may have a legitimate complaint, because after all we are weak, sinful human beings, and we do not always put others wants and needs ahead of our own. We don't need better politics, we need God's forgiveness. God's unconventional forgiveness will unite us all. AMEN.