

Joy in forgiven relationships

Our sermon series on Joy continues and this week I was pondering what to speak on. I had two things that I believe give the Christian joy: joy in relationships, and joy in forgiveness. And as I sat there debating which one to preach on, I realized, you can't have one without the other. You cannot have joy in relationships without the joy of forgiveness.

I am of a generation that is more and more isolated. Relationships boil down to one night stands, you don't want kids because they are too much work and dogs are nicer anyway. That's my generation, but we are not immune to these ideas, are we? Some people are just *work*. Some people are just *unkind*. Some people are just *not smart*. I knew a very good pastor who said, tongue in cheek, "Being a pastor would be the best job in the world, if not for all the people!" The second part of that is, of course, a pastor is called to serve and love the people, which he did both.

But he is right! Relationships bring tension and, without the gift of forgiveness, little slights, bitterness, and toxicity boil up until we just want to be left alone.

Which very well may be a lot less stressful, but a whole lot more, well, you guessed it, lonely. Not to mention it steals our ability to help and serve one another.

So how can we find some joy in the ups and downs and daily grind of relationships? That's what we explore today.

Our premise today then is this: The Christian has joy in forgiven relationships with God and one another. A mouthful I know. If you are taking notes, we can shorten it to, "The Christian has joy in forgiven relationships."

The awkwardness and bitterness in relationships started long ago. At the fall our relationship with God was broken, we no longer walked and talked with him. And our relationships with each other were broken as well. Suddenly Adam and Eve, who, before the fall, were naked and unashamed and rejoicing in the creation of God, suddenly they had the thought that most married couples do at some point or another, "Wait, I'm stuck with *them*? Oh no!" A generation later the toxicity and jealousy boils over and one of their sons, Cain, kills another, Abel.

And here we are still dealing with it. Every awkward interaction with a co-worker or an ex or an in-law or, yes, even a church member or pastor, every friend that doesn't talk to you anymore, every broken heart, every abusive relationship is a result of the brokenness of creation and sin.

Fortunately God has given a healing balm to every such case. First our relationship with God. Our God of mercy, when we broke our promise to him, didn't do as we so often do to others, just cut us out of his life. He didn't go away completely, he

didn't wipe us out, he promised a redeemer way back then in Genesis 3:15 "the offspring of woman will come crush the serpent's head." And at Christmas we rejoice as that offspring of woman, our God, comes to walk and talk amongst his people again! And he does more than that, he dies to take our sin, and rises victorious so that we might know that our relationship with God, even though we have sinned against him a million times, it's healed! He is not out to get you, he is not tallying your sins, waiting for an opportune argument to bring up that thing you did three years ago. He is the faithful One who has promised his mercy and sealed it in blood.

That's healing. That's reason for joy. God is not the bad guy anymore, "he is working all things (some good, some bad) for your good" (Romans 8).

And since that forgiveness has been given us, forgiveness we did not deserve, it is our duty (yes, duty, we say it in the Lord's prayer) and privilege to dispense this forgiveness, and tap into it in our relationships. Yes, a wife forgiving a husband, a son forgiving a parent, that is a small outpouring of the forgiveness won on the cross – a beautiful mystery and the same reason I, a sinner stand there and say I forgive you. Jesus told us to dispense his forgiveness.

And forgiving others may not seem joyful, I admit. We want vengeance, we want justice. Oh it feels so good! "That person who wronged us got what they deserved!"

Yes!” But let’s talk about getting what we deserve, and keep in mind what we just talked about, because it starts at the cross. Why did Jesus have to die? Because “the wages of sin is death.” That’s what we deserve. But God didn’t give it to us.

Jesus tells a parable of a man who was in debt a million dollars, it’s wiped out, then he fleeces the guy next to him for twenty bucks. Remember how that parable ended? The King gave that man what he deserved – it wasn’t fun for him. And I understand that people hurt us, sometimes real bad. I’ve counseled victims of abuse, I’ve heard the stories, I’ve heard the pain and anger. How hard it is to work to release!?! That’s what forgiveness means, by the way, to release them from what they deserve. That doesn’t mean all the temporal consequences go away – I certainly don’t tell the victim to go back to the abuser, no, no. But we do work to forgive and release that pain and anger.

Consider the story of Joseph. Years of bitterness boil over and his brothers throw him in a pit, many want to kill him, then they decide to sell him as a slave. He doesn’t know where he is going, who his master will be, whether he will be fed or beaten, alive or dead from week to week. And they lie to his father about it and get away with it. Imagine the bitterness and hate. And then, years later guess who comes looking for help to Joseph who is now a regent of Egypt? His brothers. He could’ve had their heads off! And it would have been so sweet, for a bit. But the net gain would be what? No brothers, spilt blood, fatherless homes, all because he

needed to whet his appetite for justice. Instead, he forgives! And guess what?

There is healing, there is joy, there is celebration and reunion. Sounds like a better net gain to me.

This is the joy forgiveness offers. It offers a chance for healing. For something different in this world. The circle of violence in this world is never ending. Look at the middle east, for years, they bomb each other, “you killed this child,” “Well you killed this child.” When will it end? When someone finally says, “I know you did this wrong, but I will not retaliate.” And that’s hard. And the retort is, “Well they don’t deserve forgiveness,” and I say, “That’s a redundant statement!” If they did nothing wrong then there would be nothing to forgive. All forgiveness is undeserved.

Just like the forgiveness won on the cross for you. Undeserved. And the pain, wrath of God, and death Jesus took on the cross, he didn’t deserve that either, you did! Never, never ask God for what you deserve, you don’t want it. Ask instead for undeserved mercy and you will receive it, and let’s learn to share it. The forgiveness of God will give way to celebration of eternal life! The forgiveness we offer in our lives, is a little shadow of it. Each spouse that hugs it out, each friendship rekindled, each anger-ulcer that dissipates, is a little shadow of the forgiveness of God, and a little foretaste of creation being made new again. And that is something joyful.

It doesn't magically make getting along with everyone a piece of cake. In fact, I love Paul's description of the body of Christ. From 1 Cor 12: The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you." Nor can the head say to the feet, "I do not need you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts we consider less honorable, we treat with greater honor. And our unpresentable parts are treated with special modesty." In Paul's illustration of the Body which represents people of the Church, he admits there are varying degrees of honor. But they all matter. If you jam your baby toe on a bookcase you know this. But he also mentions the "unmentionables" that we cover up. They don't present themselves well, they are a bit more work – but in our bodies we take care and attention to treat them with special modesty. So likewise there are people in the Church who, well, are a bit more work. And at times that is probably all of us. Doesn't mean we kick them out, in fact, we give them more attention and deal with them carefully and graciously.

I think this goes to show what has been said throughout this series. The Christian doesn't have to lie to themselves to find joy in this world. We understand it has trials and that there are personality differences, and even people who have hurt us badly. But we also understand there is hope in this midst of all of this. And the hope in our relationships is that there is forgiveness and opportunities to rebuild trust and love. We don't have to bear up under our mistakes or try to justify them.

We can confess it! Because we have one who washes them away and promises, “I will remember their sins no more,” and that “mercy triumphs over judgment.” We talk a lot about “forgiving ourselves,” the Bible doesn’t talk that way much, it does talk a lot about God forgiving you. And I think that’s because if God has forgiven you, who is anyone, even yourself to say otherwise? Listen to the verdict of the King.

Don’t listen to the narcissists who’ve “never made a mistake,” or the two-faced who will take mercy from someone and never offer it to another, or the ones who smile at someone then talk bad about them when they leave, no, no, no. There’s no joy there. No, joy is found in the person you can call in the middle of the night.

The family that supports you and pulls for you. In the brothers and sisters who pray for you. In the people who, even after you’ve done wrong, or taken a big loss, will still love you. Let’s be those people. Because after all, that’s who our God is. His unconditional love is made manifest in Jesus, the One who died to heal our broken relationship with him and with others. The King has made his verdict, you are forgiven in Jesus, rejoice! Amen.