

## **LUKE 6:27-37 Conflict & Forgiveness**

One of the hardest things we have to deal with in this life is emotional pain. When people we love or trust or respect treat us badly, we become hurt and damaged. And pain on the inside goes very deep.

If we are human, our natural response is to try and make the pain go away. If we get a thorn in our foot, or splinter in our finger, we don't leave it there, do we? We are very careful to remove it so that it will stop causing us pain.

A year or so after we arrived in this parish, Jay and I had the privilege of joining a SOMA mission to the Seychelles. While we were there, we visited one of the outlying islands, which had a colony of big - and somewhat tame - turtles! They were huge!

While we were having lunch in the beachside park, one of them came and tried to join a group of neighbouring picnickers. Their local tour guide knew how to make the turtle retreat. He went up to it and whacked it on the head a few times with a piece of driftwood. The turtle very quickly backed away. It did not like the pain, so it retreated from it.

When we are hurting emotionally – hurting on the inside - we also want to make the pain go away.

As a priest, I have spent a lot of time speaking with couples and families who have broken up. Why do they break up? It's because of pain. People can't deal with it. Pain can come through unhealthy patterns of behaviour; it can come through infidelity, through substance abuse, gambling, or just plain self centredness.

When families experience conflict, the natural response is to try and make the pain go away. People generally do this in one of two ways:

1. They FIGHT the pain! And so you find there are families where there is no peace. There is always shouting and yelling; there are threats and insults and tears; and sometimes there is even physical abuse.

2. Or, they RETREAT from the pain – like the turtle. When the fighting doesn't work, and the pain becomes too much – somebody leaves. It's easier to just walk away, and try and start again, than to keep facing the pain every day.

Of course families are not the only place where we have this dynamic. People can experience conflict in the workplace, or in organisations they belong to, or even in their churches.

I remember a conversation I had when I first arrived in a previous parish. I looked through the roll. I asked my warden "Where is this person? I don't recall seeing him." The warden said, "He had a big argument with the last rector, and he left the church." It's not uncommon. It happens in a lot of parishes.

The natural human response is FIGHT or FLIGHT!

Yet, we can imagine how sad it makes Jesus when his people can't get along. When something as precious as a marriage, or a relationship in his church goes sour, and people live in continual conflict or leave because they can't sort out their differences!

At one time it was the thing for kids in our youth groups wear a bracelet around their wrist which has these letters on it: W.W.J.D. They stand for "What Would Jesus Do?" It was a great reminder to consider all our actions – and all our thinking – from Jesus' perspective.

And what is Jesus' perspective? He's pretty clear, when he says, "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you."

When someone is causing us pain, we may well see them as enemies. Though often, they are not enemies – they are simply people we love or connect with, and we have just got into a pattern of acting and reacting in a way that causes both parties pain. Whatever the case, Jesus' words ar

meant for us. We need to love the people who cause us pain; and – we are we are to do good to them.

Yet, it is hard to even be polite to someone who has hurt us, isn't it? We'd much rather just avoid them. That seems easiest course of action. Yet Jesus is saying we should do good to them. We should look at them as Jesus does – see them as someone he loves so much, that he gave his life for them.

We all sin. One sin is not worse than another. All sin is abhorrent to God. If God forgave us our sin, then we can believe he will forgive the other person's sin as well. If we look at someone and can begin to see them as Jesus does, then we will be able to think of ways to do good to them.

What would be some good things we could do? Every situation is different - but if we put our minds to it - think and pray about it - God will inspire us with ideas! To do good to someone requires that we be pro-active; that we initiate the action.

Then Jesus tells us to go a step further: we are to bless the other person, and pray for them. Incidentally – when Jesus said pray for them – he didn't mean “Lord smite them!” He meant we should pray positively for them.

We can ask God to bless the person who is hurting us. We can ask God to help the person deal with their problems; or to reveal himself to them, or to help them experience his love. (which we can exemplify in our interactions with them) We can ask God to help us sort out our differences; we can ask God to help us see things from the other person's viewpoint; God may lead us to pray many other things for them as well. Once we start praying, the Holy Spirit, who knows what is at the root of the problem - and that's for both parties - can guide us in our praying. It can be relationship-changing!

In the reading, Jesus talks some more about how we should relate to difficult people. He says, “**If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is**

yours, do not ask for it back. Do for others just what you want them to do for you.” In other words, Jesus is telling us to be loving and generous towards those who give us a hard time - in a way that is over and above what might be expected from us.

Though I don't believe this applies when someone is suffering physical abuse. That is one time when it is not only right, but necessary, to walk away. Having said that though, in conflicts where physical abuse is not the issue, Jesus is very clear in how we are to relate to people who we see as enemies.

In this passage, Jesus then introduces a concept with which we are all familiar. He says, “Do not judge others, and God will not judge you; do not condemn others, and God will not condemn you; forgive others, and God will forgive you.”

Forgiveness is at the very heart of Jesus teaching. It is through his death and resurrection that we have been forgiven for our sin, and have been given eternal life. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we ask Jesus to forgive us in the same way that we forgive those who sin against us.

Peter came to Jesus one day asking how many times he had to forgive his brother – was it 7 times? Jesus' answer - 70x7 - was an indication that we should always forgive.

Unforgiveness is so very destructive. It can cause once healthy relationships to shrivel and die. It can cause us to lose our peace. It can threaten our physical health and it can affect our spiritual, mental and even physical well being. Have you ever unexpectedly come across someone you don't get along with, and have had to be civil to them? Have you noticed how that churns you up on the inside?

If we forgive, we set not only the other person free, but we set OURSELVES free as well. Aside from being what God wants, forgiving someone who has hurt us is the best thing we can possibly do for OURSELVES.

However, forgiving someone who has hurt us is not easy is it? In fact it can be one of the hardest things God calls us to do. It can be very costly to let go of what we feel is our right to be angry, or even to get even. At times, we may feel we simply cannot forgive the other person – we are hurting far too much. If that is the case, then we simply need to pray “Lord, help me to forgive.” That is a prayer he will always answer.

Sometimes forgiving another person means taking the first step. We may feel that a fractured or broken relationship is entirely the other person’s fault. Yet to forgive often means letting go of the idea that the other person must make the first move. Jesus calls US to live a life of sacrificial love. If he is convicting us about this at all, then WE need to make the first move, not wait for the other person to realise their mistake. We can leave the other person in Jesus hands.

When someone makes the first move towards forgiveness, all of a sudden reconciliation becomes possible. Unity can be restored! And God’s peace can once more reign in a family, or at work, or in the body of Christ.

Forgiveness is at the very heart of the Gospel. Is there anyone in our family, at work, in our social or sports clubs, or in our fellowship who has hurt us, and we have not forgiven? If the answer is yes – this is serious business. Jesus’ words from our Gospel this morning challenge us to forgive! As we come to Communion this morning - if we have something to let go of - that might be a good time to do it.

Then let’s go out and live in that forgiveness!