

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/25/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 26 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, thank God for the gift of forgiveness. Take time to rejoice in the freedom that gift brings. Then ask the Holy Spirit to show you the person who needs to hear the good news of God's grace love and mercy from you.*

From time to time, I am blessed to be led into conversations with people who have given up on God or the church. Often discussions with these folks ends up focusing on how they believe that they have done something in their life that is so terrible, that they just can't forgive themselves. This shame or guilt that they feel is what has led them away from a more meaningful relationship with God and to isolate themselves from other believers. When we begin to talk about this sense of unforgiveness, I will assure them that there isn't anything that God can't and won't forgive and that a relationship with God is not based on what we have or have not done, but rather on faith. What I find interesting in these conversations is that frequently, they recognize that God will forgive them; again, they just can't forgive themselves. Our talks usually move from there into consideration of whose forgiveness matters more—God's or their own. Reluctantly, they will acknowledge that it is God's that should take priority. We will then talk about how God's forgiveness can free them to let go of any guilt or shame, though recognizing that this may take some time. But that freedom also can open the door to exploring a more meaningful connection to God that can help them to further fully embrace that forgiveness.

There are many in our families, neighborhoods, and communities who live with the shame of a mistake made. Unfortunately, for many of these folks, it is the church that has impressed this guilt upon them. Rather than announcing the good news of the unconditional forgiveness that comes from Jesus' death on the cross, some churches have chosen to give them a message of judgment and condemnation.

When we think about those whom Jesus encountered and how He treated and responded to them, we should recognize the powerful message we have to share with others. The woman caught in adultery was spared punishment because of Jesus. She was also told to go and sin no more—certainly not that she could live without sin from then on, but rather that this particular sinful behavior could be left behind. I've often wondered what her life was like after that instruction from Jesus. Zacchaeus was hated and ostracized by his community for his excessive and abusive overtaxing of them. When Jesus visited Zacchaeus, he was motivated to not only end this unjust behavior, but to pay back four times over anyone he had cheated and to give half his possessions to the poor.

The message of God's love and forgiveness has tremendous power to change a person's life. It is a message, actually a gift, that has been given to us and in which we hopefully live with joy. But it is also a promise that we can share with others. More than this, it is the gift that we need to offer to others to free them from their bondage to guilt and shame. It is the gift that we need to share to overturn their wrong perceptions about how God feels about them. It is the gift that can set people free and bring them into a saving relationship with the Lord. For many, this will only happen if we commit ourselves to offering that gift to them.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey