

## “Pardon Me”

As you can see from your bulletin, I have called this morning’s message ‘Pardon Me’. Let’s talk about that phrase. It can be rather different, depending on where you place the emphasis. It can be uttered in at least 4 ways.

1. It can be, Pardon Me, meaning “Excuse me” when your tummy rumbles & all around you have heard it, or if you interrupt someone to ask for directions; “Pardon me, can you tell me how to get to St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church?”
2. Or it can be a reaction when someone says something you don’t like -“PARDON ME!”
3. Or it could be said when you have done something wrong to someone, & you ask them to forgive you; “I’m sorry I did this to you, will you pardon me – will you forgive me?”
4. Or, of course, the way we use this statement in prayer, asking God to forgive our sins, “Pardon me, Holy One, please forgive my transgressions.”

Any way you want to put it, PARDON ME is a very important tool in our vocabulary. All four of our examples are ways of asking for forgiveness. But, how can we learn to forgive?

I was watching a show on television. A young woman, (let’s call her Tammy), was telling the host that her mother had sold her to another family for a thousand dollars when she was young. Now, she remembered her mother as a woman who cried all the time, & who left her alone a lot. She remembered crying frequently herself; crying because she was dirty, hungry, lonely or afraid. When her mother was there, she ignored her child, in favour of a bottle, or a needle. //

Tammy remembers the fear she felt when the arguments & fights began between her mother & her significant other, & how she would crawl under the bed in order to feel some modicum of safety. What an incredibly sad story!

Blissfully, the family who adopted her, was a loving family. They were not aware of their adopted daughter’s background – not aware of the torment that this child had endured for the first four years of her young life.

During the ensuing years, Tammy grew up with other siblings, all adopted. She learned to love her new parents and her other brothers and sisters. She learned how to play and to live in harmony with others. She experienced no sense of fear when her father came home – no feeling of being alone in the world.

Tammy excelled at school, was able to get a full university scholarship, and became a social worker, specializing in the counseling of substance-abuse victims. She is now married to a Pastor and has a daughter of her own. To all external appearances she is a wonderful mother, wife, colleague, friend, and daughter to her adoptive parents...who even live on the same street.

So, we have a happy ending, right? Tammy, it would seem, had everything – a loving family, the respect of all who knew her, a beautiful home...in short, everything that a person could possibly ask for.

However, in her quiet times, her lonely times, what do you think she pined for? She still pined for that mother who did worse than give her away.

She barely remembered that woman, but the feelings still kept coming over her, loud and clear. So, she wrote to the host of that talk show, laid out her problems, and asked for help (even though she didn't really know what she wanted help with.) Producers of the TV show worked hard, and were successful in finding Tammy's biological mother. She too was interviewed.

The mother, let's call her Alice, had been in and out of abusive relationships for her whole life – relationships in which a child was not welcome; relationships in which having a child was a nuisance...and she had three other children with whom she had lost contact. Alcohol and drugs had ruled her life.

She was only young herself when Tammy was born. Her own father had abused her physically and mentally and her own brother had abused her sexually. She felt worthless! She had hated Tammy from the moment she knew she was pregnant, and things got even worse after the baby was born. Drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, violence, abuse – all of these things had produced a worthless human being.

Then came the moment that the audience had awaited...the moment when the host would bring both these women together. One looked just like a much older version of the other, much older than the actual age difference. They made eye contact, then immediately fell into a tight embrace. It was two or three minutes before either of them could produce a coherent sound.

Each of them had heard the other being interviewed, and they both realized what a devastating life they would have had, if they had been together. Alice was clean now, and it was clear that they now had the opportunity to get to know each other.

Suddenly, Tammy found herself just being happy to be with her biological mother – the past was the past, and the future was to be a new beginning for them both. Tammy had forgiven her mother. What an amazing revelation. All the grief that Alice had caused to a little child, was forgiven. Forgiven! I wonder how many of us would be big enough to do that. Most of us find forgiveness to be one of the hardest things that the Lord requires of us.

John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts' Bay Colony, had a vision of a covenant community that would live together in obedience to God. One day, a friend of his, told him that his neighbour, John Jones, was stealing wood from the Winthrop woodpile.

Winthrop wrote the following letter to Mr. Jones: 'Dear Mr. Jones: This is becoming a very harsh and cold winter. If you run short of wood, please do not hesitate to help yourself from my woodpile.'

The friend who had told Winthrop of the crime said, 'What good did that do?'

Winthrop answered, 'I have just cured Mr. Jones of stealing!'

When we are wronged, we have to do something, but we are not obliged (except perhaps by inclination), to react in a way that retaliates, poisons, or perpetuates the wrong. There is always another way – the way of Christ-like tolerance that is called forgiveness.

Remember Joseph & his coat of many colours? We've all heard that story. What a wonderful story of forgiveness – sold into slavery decades prior by his brothers, then those same brothers asking for grain from a high official of the country & discovering that this was the brother whom they had wronged.

And what happened? Joseph, their brother, it was revealed, was that very high official, and he forgave them.

Then there's the Prodigal son – also a story that you know well. He left his father's house, squandered the money his father had given him, & came back home, cap in hand. And, what did his father do, thrash him & punish him for the rest of his life? No, his father forgave him too.

What can we learn from the stories we have heard this morning? Well, of course, it's obvious – isn't it? We have to learn to forgive one another. Now that's something easier said than done! How do we actually forgive someone who has done us harm?

When Sherry and I went to England together for the very first time, we visited Coventry Cathedral – a huge, modern building, with an enormous glass wall which opens up the vista of the original, bombed-out cathedral, creating a picture. And it is a huge picture, which lends stark reality to man's inhumanity to man.

Thousands of people died in that air-raid over Coventry. Countless families endured tragedy that night. Now, decades later, when you enter the burned-out ruin of that old church, your eyes naturally travel to the altar. On that altar stands a ragged, bent and melted cross. Behind the cross is a more recent gold engraving on a wall. It merely states, 'Father, forgive.' Real forgiveness in action!

I am sure that I am not alone when I say that I find it hard to really forgive. I may temporarily forget some slight or injustice done to me or mine - but to really forgive that person? This is one of those things about being a Christian that we pay 'lip service' to. We pretend that all is forgiven and forgotten, but the memory lingers on to re-surface at a later date, to be used as a weapon when required.

However, at least once a week, we recite the Lord's Prayer, and we are so familiar with the contents that we have forgotten the words...can't see the forest for the trees. In that prayer we ask God to forgive our (or debts, or trespasses depending on your denomination), and we tell Him that we forgive those who trespass against us. But do we really? Have we put forgiveness completely into practice?

Friends, we need to pray for the STRENGTH to be able to forgive, so that we may genuinely do so. Let's accept a challenge this week. In our prayerful deliberations, let's think of someone (still living), who has hurt us...doesn't matter how long ago. Now, let's contact them, either through a phone call, e-mail, or hand-written note, and let them know that we have forgiven them.

In Matthew 6:14&15, we read: "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive".

Do you recall what Jesus said as they drove nails through His body - as they hung Him on a tree to die? 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!' If He can forgive them, then surely our forgiveness is easy by comparison. So, let's promise to make that personal contact this week.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a thought based on our reading from Matthew:

***To forgive is to set a prisoner free & you will soon discover that the prisoner was, in fact, you.***