

## “RAP to Forgive”

Date: March 31, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 5:23-24; Mt. 18:21-35

Theme: Forgiveness, resentments

Occasion: Lent 4, forgiveness series

For the past several weeks we've been talking about forgiveness. Even though we all know we should do it, it's not always easy. But when we do forgive, it shows that God is truly alive in us. To forgive is to show grace. To be forgiven means that we should now forgive others.

The truth is forgiveness is as much for us as it is for the other person. If we don't forgive, we're going to carry that resentment around inside us and it is going to eat away at us. Sadly, half the time we're angry at someone, they're not even aware that we're angry. We suffer, not them.

Rev. Charles Stanley once wrote, “A person who harbors unforgiveness always loses. Regardless of how wrong the other person may have been, refusing to forgive means corruption in life. It starts with one relationship and then works its way into all the rest.”

Rev. Stanley goes on to say, and I love his analogy: “Holding on to resentments is like grabbing a rattlesnake by the tail. You *are* going to be bitten. As the poison works its way through the many facets of your personality, death will occur. Death that is more far-reaching than your physical death, for it has the potential to destroy those around you as well.”

Think about what Rev. Stanley said for just a minute. “Holding on to resentment is like grabbing hold of a rattlesnake by the tail; you are sure to be bitten.” Wow! That's a powerful image. I don't particularly like snakes and I especially don't like the thought of being bitten by a poisonous snake.

But boy do I know the truth about holding on to resentments. It is just like poison. It eats away at you. You feel terrible inside. It affects the way

you relate to other people. Resentments are like poison; poison to the soul and poison to all of our relationships, including our relationship with God.

Often the little hurts we feel, that we can nurse into a grudge or resentment, are the result of misunderstandings, or false perceptions. If we're not careful we can develop a very angry attitude by always noticing the little slights which others do, the infractions of the rules, or the perceived insults that get us worked up.

These are not *major* hurts or offences, but they are the kind that many of us deal with on a regular basis as a part of daily living. Adam Hamilton in his book *Forgiveness*, counsels us not to sweat the small stuff, to learn to let things go and not make a big deal out of things.

But how do we do that? How do we avoid holding on to the anger or irritation, or resentment that comes from the little stuff that is thrown at us each day. And how often, how often do we need to forgive these acts?

Peter asked a similar question in the one Gospel lesson read this morning. He asked, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him, seven times? Is seven times enough, Lord? I'm on number six and I'm hoping seven is all I owe him."

Jesus surprised Peter by answering, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven," an idiomatic phrase that meant, in essence, an infinite number of times. Jesus was telling Peter, and through Peter each of us, that we are to let go of our right to hold on to these little hurts, and even some of the bigger hurts.

Our lives are meant to be characterized by grace and forgiveness. Jesus was asking us to say, "You've wronged me and I could hold on to my anger, demanding some kind of satisfaction, but I choose instead to let it go and not hold it against you any longer."

I'm guessing that if each of us held on to every little irritant, every slight and perceived wrong, within a few days we could easily wind up with a backpack full of resentments, more than a person could carry. Often, others aren't even aware that we feel they have wronged us. Or, they might not know how to ask forgiveness.

So, somewhere along the way we've got to find the capacity to let go. But how do we do that? For these little slights, Adam Hamilton suggests three steps. We can remember these 3 steps by the acronym RAP.

**The first step** is to *remember* your own shortcomings. When you feel somebody has offended you, stop and consider how many times you've done something like it. For me, I find it very irritating when people make a turn in their cars and they don't use their turn signal.

I used to get extremely angry at them and call them names, until I caught myself doing the same thing one day. Now, I am much more patient with other people, when I remember *I am not perfect either*. It's difficult to stay mad at somebody else when you're conscious of your own flaws.

**The second step** in letting go of the little things: *assume* the best of person who has slighted you. I used to get pretty irritated with people who were driving too fast and going over the speed limit. I'd work myself into a little tizzy being angry at them for not driving safely.

Now, I try to imagine what their situation might be. Are they late for an appointment? Is there an emergency at home? Did his wife just call to tell him she's ready to deliver their baby? I assume the best about them; I give them the benefit of the doubt. I try not to judge and be resentful.

This leads us to **the third step** in letting go of the little things. Jesus tells us what to do when people mistreat us and cause things to go poorly

for us. He told us to *pray* for them and to love them. The Apostle Paul told us not to return evil for evil, but to return blessing instead.

In my younger days, I used to speed up and try to keep in front of those speeding drivers. Somehow I thought I could put them in their place. Now, I see that my desire for revenge is actually dangerous, to me and to others. And so I pray for the other person:

“Lord, I don’t know what his or her circumstances are. But please bless him or her. Keep them safe. Keep the other drivers safe. And let us all get to our destination safely.”

As I begin to pray for the other person, my attitude changes. Instead of being judgmental, angry and resentful, I begin to feel compassion and concern. Once we begin practicing the RAP method, and it takes time, it can almost become a game.

*Remember* your own shortcomings; *Assume* the best about the other person; and *Pray* for the person. In the process you can avoid being caught up in anger or irritation.

Instead of holding on to rattlesnake tails, let’s practice the RAP: **R**emember your own shortcomings. **A**ssume the best of people. **P**ray for them. Forgiveness isn’t easy. And forgiving the bigger hurts takes more work than just this little acronym.

But if we start small, and practice it regularly, perhaps the little things will take care of some of the bigger things. May God help us to become gracious and forgiving people. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book, *Forgiveness: Finding Peace through Letting Go*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 69-76