

Baggage Week 2- Forgiveness

This is the second week of our new series for this new year, and it's called Baggage.

If this is your first time here at Good Shepherd Parish, or your first time in a long time, welcome. I hope your time spent in worship with us today is a time of blessing for you.

As we celebrate this new year, we may be thinking about new beginnings and a fresh start. Maybe this will be the best year ever.

But, for some of us, it may be difficult to make a fresh start if we haven't dealt with the negative things in our lives; things like past hurts, or things we may have done to others. It may even be the things that we've done to ourselves.

A failure to let go of past hurts makes it so difficult to experience true joy and to truly make this the best year ever. It makes it difficult for us to be who our Heavenly Father wants us to be.

We cannot be the loving presence of God in our world today if we are dragging around negativity over past experiences.

One solution to this dilemma is to embrace *forgiveness*. The ability to forgive is one of the things that set us apart as Christians. And it's a very simple concept: Forgiveness simply means to cancel a debt.

But forgiveness is much more complicated than that. People think forgiveness is a *great idea*...for somebody else. It's complicated because when we forgive, we absorb the cost of that debt, which could be an apology or some other kind of restitution or restoration. Someone always has to absorb the cost of a debt, it is sacrificed.

We are called as Christians to sacrifice and I'll talk more about that later. Right now I'd like to look at how sacrifice has played a role throughout salvation history.

Sacrifices to God were very important throughout the Bible. They were a way to atone for sins. They were a way to seal an agreement among two parties. They were a way to thank God for his many blessings.

We see in the book of Exodus, the Israelites offering the first Passover meal, sacrificing a lamb and smearing its blood on the door posts of their homes. They offered the lamb and ate it, to commemorate what God was doing that night in saving them from slavery.

This passage from scripture has powerful imagery that mirrors in symbolic ways the sacrifice of Christ, thirteen hundred years later.

500 years after the first Passover, the prophet Isaiah began preaching. He foretold the coming of a Messiah.

He depicted this Messiah as a suffering servant, someone who would sacrifice himself for good of all.

He described this servant in this way:

- He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter...

The Jewish people were still offering sacrifices in the temple to atone for their sins. But the problem was, these sacrifices were never enough because those who offered the sacrifices were also sinners.

There was always more sin, and more lambs were needed. Isaiah was looking to the time when God would send a sinless lamb, who would be the one and only, final, perfect, sacrifice.

Another 700 years later, John the Baptist arrives on the scene and he is baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins.

Some thought that he might be the long awaited Messiah, the one Isaiah foretold those many years before.

But John tells them that he is not the Messiah. Rather, he points to Jesus and says:

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

He recognizes Jesus as the Messiah; as the one promised throughout all of salvation history. John calls him the Lamb of God who will be sacrificed for many.

But why was a sacrifice necessary? Well, God is all good and all holy. He created us out of love. And so he deserves all of our love and all of our worship. But we continue to fall short of that goal and create a debt we cannot repay.

Jesus went to the cross and paid that price for us. Since he was perfect, his sacrifice on the cross was also perfect, as no sacrifice before him could be. He has repaid our debt as no one else could. What does the cross mean to us? It means “Debt paid in full!”

Sure, there are things we have done and continue to do that might well be inexcusable, but thanks be to God they are forgivable!

The challenge of this series is to follow God’s example, and grow more like him, specifically through the process of forgiveness.

And that process doesn’t start with us. It starts with the divine grace of God through which we accomplish forgiveness.

It was some years ago that I realized that the hurt my father had caused me was still a big stumbling block in my life.

He was a good man but flawed and broken as we all are. He did what he thought was best and it wasn't always the best thing he could've done.

In working through all of this, thanks to the grace of God, I came to a place where I could forgive him.

Unfortunately, he had died a few years previously and there was no opportunity for a face to face with him; and I don't know if I could have done it that way.

He didn't even know how much he had hurt me. But in spite of all those challenges, and through the grace and care of God, I was able to forgive him.

This certainly didn't wipe away all the hurt. It didn't magically disappear. What my forgiveness did was give me the freedom to put down that burden and to walk away from it.

It gave me the freedom to leave it behind and not look back. It enabled me to love him more fully and appreciate that he did the best he could do, in his humanity.

The point here is that forgiveness = freedom; freedom from the chains that unforgiveness puts around us; freedom from always being the victim; freedom from the prison that keeps us from loving ourselves and loving others.

You cannot put a price on that kind of freedom. You cannot put a price on the peace and the healing that can come from letting go and practicing forgiveness.

There are some people who haven't recognized the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. They have denied the reality of their sin, and don't believe there is even a debt to be paid.

It is important to accept the reality of our sin and our brokenness and the great sacrifice of Christ our Redeemer. In that way we are able to seek and find forgiveness in our lives.

And, as a result, we are called to sacrifice, to forgive, just as God has forgiven us and reconciled us to himself.

Maybe we will never have the opportunity to do it face to face, maybe we wouldn't want to, but in our hearts we can forgive those who have wronged us.

It could be that what they did to us is inexcusable, but thanks be to God, it is forgivable!