**The Freedom of Forgiveness**

**Sermon 9 in the series “Living Long in the Land”**

**Sunday 31st March 2024 – Easter Day**

**Preacher: Very Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Texts:** Romans 6: 1-14 & John 19:16 – 20:9

**Introduction**

This is the ninth and final sermon in a series called Living Long in the Land, where we have reflected on the factors derived from being part of a Christian faith community that contribute to well-being and long life.

It is my strong belief that forgiving and being forgiven is a big contributing factor. This is a core and foundational tenet of the Jesus story. Think about the line in the prayer he taught us to pray: *“forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”*

This is a two-fold thing – knowing forgiveness and showing forgiveness! In this sermon series we have been referring to the book and Netflix series called The Blue Zone – Secrets for Living Longer. One of the findings of this study is that the older folk who live in these blue zones almost inevitably belong to faith communities – places where forgiveness is a core value.

So today we talk about the Freedom of Forgiveness.

And this is the core message of Easter! In talking about this I want to zero in on Jesus’ final words in John’s account: *“It is finished!”*

1. **Trapped in grief and guilt**

Theologians load the words ‘it is finished’ with the idea that Jesus was talking about the fulfilment of his mission, and especially the forgiveness of sin that was won on the cross. William Barlcay talks about Jesus declaring his work done and bowing his head to die as a man who would lay his head on the pillow at night to sleep knowing he has completed his mission. But they, like us, are looking back through the lens of the resurrection.

Let’s instead stay in the moment that Jesus said these words. For the 4 women and the disciple John who were there, surely when they heard those words they heard ‘it is over’. Finished, ended. This movement, this dream of the kingdom of God based on Jesus being the Messiah, has just come to a grinding halt.

There is a story told of an encounter that happened between Pontius Pilate and the man who gave the tomb for Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea. Pilate says to Joseph, you put a lot of work into that tomb, I am surprised that you gave it away, to which Joseph replied ‘but they only needed it for the weekend!’ A joke of course, but a joke based on wrong information. Yes they only needed it for the weekend but at the point Jesus was placed in the tomb, that was not what they were thinking. Rather they thought he was dead and buried for good.

Certainly that is how the gospels depict the Friday night and Saturday of Easter – a dispirited, depressed, grief-stricken, fearful group of disciples whose dreams around Jesus had just collapsed – it is finished indeed!

And in that mix of feelings was definitely guilt. The gospels record how, in the face of Jesus’ arrest, they all ran away! This is the guilt associated with cowardice and the desertion of a friend in an hour of need.

And I think that guilt got worse in the aftermath of the death of Jesus. There is an excellent wee book about grief called “good Grief” that talks about how guilt and regret can be heightened when a loved one dies. I am sure this would have been happening of the disciples locked as they were in a room with their grief – they would have felt trapped in the guilt of desertion (at the key moment ‘they all ran away’).

The Romans 6 passage that was read today, certainly captured this feeling when it talks about being slaves to sin, trapped and enslaved in sin and guilt.

And the guilt factor is highlighted in the gospel account through the experiences of the 2 disciples, Judas and Peter. For Judas it was the guilt of betrayal and for Peter the guilt of denial.

Judas was clearly wracked with guilt about betraying Jesus - to the point where, upon hearing that Jesus has been crucified, he tries to return the money he was paid for the betrayal and then, tragically, hangs himself! He died trapped in sin and guilt. This is a graphic and tragic example of what Romans 6 calls being trapped in our sins. So it is that when we have messed up, feel guilty and have not experienced forgiveness that we feel desperately trapped. The first sentence in the prologue of the book The Gospel According To Judas by Ray S. Anderson that says:

“I saw it in the men’s restroom in a restaurant in San Francisco, printed in block letters with a blue felt tip pen across the top of the mirror:

‘Come back Judas, all is forgiven’

But it was too late, Judas died trapped feelings of unforgiveness!

And many people live trapped in unforgiveness. I say trapped because of the negative and life robbing aspects of not forgiving others or living with unforgiveness itself. The negativity goes both ways, attached to both feeling unforgiven and being unforgiving. The Mayo Clinic in the USA has written about thenegative effects of holding a grudge.

‘If you struggle with finding forgiveness, you might:
• Bring anger and bitterness into new relationships and experiences.
• Become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present.
• Become depressed, irritable or anxious.
• Feel at odds with your spiritual beliefs.
• Lose valuable and enriching connections with others.’

1. **Released from sin and guilt**

The contrast between Judas and Peter is startling. Peter was likewise wracked with guilt. When he denied knowing Jesus for the third time, Luke’s gospel records how Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter …. and Peter went outside and wept bitterly But Peter manages to survive the dark feeling of Easter Saturday and experience the wonderful forgiveness of the risen Christ! There is this beautiful encounter between Peter and the risen Christ on the beach where Jesus forgives him and restores him 3 times, in recognition of the 3 denials! Peter then is beautifully freed from his sin and guilt to become the amazing leader of the early Christian movement.

If John first heard the words ‘It is finished’ and an ending as he stood there at the cross, I am certain by the time he wrote the gospel many years later he had a completely different interpretation of those words. Having experienced the resurrection, having experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, having seen the amazing and lifegiving spread of the Jesus movement in the first Century, John wrote this gospel as an older man with deep theological insight. He reflects back on the words “it is finished” with a completely different perspective. It was not the end, it was an amazing and freeing new beginning! And in the same way theologians over the centuries see those words as loaded with the idea of Jesus’ mission having been completed, his goal of saving people from sin and guilt fulfilled. Both of the last utterances of Jesus on the cross recorded in John’s gospel point us to this understanding.

First, ‘I am thirsty’. He we believe Jesus was referring to the cup of suffering that he had to drink to rescue humanity from sin and unforgiveness. Leading up to his death he makes repeated references to the suffering to come as cup he must drink. Now at the hour of his death, when he says ‘I am thirsty’ he is saying now I am ready to drink the cup, every last drop!

Secondly, ‘it is finished’. The Greek word for “it is finished”, *tetelestai*. Roman authorities used to have stamps made with this word. It was applied to bills, invoices, once they had been fully paid, ‘it is finished.’ And it was stamped on a note recording the prison term of a prisoner once the term had been served, ‘it is finished.’ And when a slave was set free, their slavery papers were stamped with the words, ‘it is finished’!

In other words, when Jesus died on the cross, the price for our waywardness and sin has been paid in full. And our imprisonment to feeling of guilt and sin is over, he has served the time for us, ‘it is finished.’ We are no longer enslaved to sin and guilt!

What amazing grace! What amazing freedom from sin. What an amazing motivation to then forgive others and release them from the burden of guilt! Lord forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

This all equates totally with research into health and wellbeing. Unforgiveness is a toxic poison in our system. Like Judas, when we don’t feel the forgiveness of another it is a heavy burden to carry that has negative health impacts. And conversely, when we don’t forgive it can work as a poison in our system. Indeed, the health and well-being of forgiving others is well documented. The Mayo clinic records them this way:

The benefits of forgiving others
• Healthier relationships.
• Improved mental health.
• Less anxiety, stress and hostility.
• Fewer symptoms of depression.
• Lower blood pressure.
• A stronger immune system.
• Improved heart health.
• Improved self-esteem.

It seems to me that there is also hugely positive well-being aspects to experiencing forgiveness. To withhold forgiveness from another is a powerful weapon. To give it is not only good for us but clear for those who receive.

I remember reading about an observation that the pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung made about forgiveness. He said that his patients who regularly attended services of communion seemed to be more psychologically well-adjusted. He was talking about the positive impact on well-being that comes from experiencing forgiveness.

The American actress Suzanne Somers said *“Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.”*

Certainly, to forgive and to be forgiven is a powerful gift! It releases the toxic poison of unforgiveness and brings us to a new freedom and life!

This is poignantly illustrated in the 1986 movie The Mission. Set in South America in the 18th Century, it features a Spanish soldier, Rodrigo Mendoza, who is wracked with guilt over things he has done, including the brutal treatment of local tribes. His spiritual advisor is a Jesuit priest, Father Gabrielle. He challenges Mendoza to do penance by dragging all his armour and his sword behind him up a steep hillside to where the tribe he most abused live. When he arrives there is a tense moment when a tribesman pulls out a knife – but, beautifully, rather than slit his throat, the tribesman cuts the rope that binds him to his soldier past, and the armour and sword fall away down the hill. The power of forgiveness is palpable in both the weeping of Mendoza and the joy of the tribespeople – both freed from the slavery of sin and unforgiveness.

How many millions of Christians have known that freedom over the centuries? How many millions will celebrate it today with us around the world? And how many wonderful hymns have been inspired by it – Amazing Grace, the response of the guilt-wracked slave ship captain John Newton when he experienced the grace of God and the freedom of forgiveness.

And inspired Charles Wesley to write what some would say is his most famous hymn:

And can it be that I should gain

An interest in the Saviour’s blood.

Died he for me, who caused His pain?

For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be,

That thou, my God, should die for me.