

WELCOME 9th March 2025 – 1st SUNDAY IN LENT '25 C

Matthew 18:21-35 & Jeremiah 15:15-20

Welcome! What a blessing to be together again today! With your worship order you have in your hands **Bible Study Qs/Growing Praise** handouts... Those are provided to lead you deeper into God's word/work in your life, & help you share that w/ someone else. We also use them for our **Zoom Bible Study Catch-ups on Friday @ 1p.m.** Link is on website...by Tuesday/Wednesday...

As we move into this week... Reconciliation **You** want to start a fight in Australia try to get a group of your friends discussing that. Whether b/ Indigenous Australians & descendants of European settlement, or crime victims & crime perpetrators... Most of us shy away from that conversation because too much contemporary thinking about reconciliation is overloaded w/ visions of enforced compensation, one-sided blame, or generational vengeance.

True reconciliation involves forgiveness... **the** deliberate & conscious choice to lay aside any perceived right to get back what's lost & exact punishment on the wrongdoer instead treating them w/ mercy, removing any barrier that might exist to establishing a healthy restored relationship among the involved parties.

Forgiveness-based reconciliation is what the Father offers in Jesus & to which he calls us to live as the forgiven redeemed children of his eternal love. The problem: forgiveness & reconciliation do not come naturally to any of **us**. When someone hurts us or someone we love...our immediate response is usually a desire for revenge. We hear God's call to forgive & be reconciled to those who've hurt us as unnatural or impossible...Unnatural...? Yes. Impossible...never.

We who have experienced & know the forgiveness, grace & mercy of God, are now empowered by him to forgive, reconcile, & restore as we have been forgiven, reconciled, & restored. When the darkness of a broken relationship or a deep personal wound clouds our way...remember what we do as followers of Jesus: *WE. BANISH. DARKNESS.* By & in the love of Jesus...we banish darkness...Until our last breath.

Reconciliation is the unnatural action of the redeemed to preserve relationships in the forgiving strength **of** Christ.

Let's pray...then explore & experience that together...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of healing and wholeness, Thank you! For all the evidence of your goodness and mercy - not only in stories of old, but in our lives today. Lives bruised with tragedy find consolation when touched by your gracious Spirit. Lives scarred with suffering and rejection have hope renewed through the power of the living Christ. We praise and adore you for hearts and lives transformed by your grace and mercy and we pray that our lives will reflect your kindness. Arouse in us we pray, a love like yours so that we reach out to this wounded and troubled world with the compassion of Christ, proclaiming the gospel with integrity and generosity of spirit to friends and strangers alike. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

LET'S SING...

FAITH CHAT:

1. What's the greatest challenge in forgiving someone who has genuinely hurt you?
2. When have you felt most "disappointed" or "let down" by God? What did you do?

1st SUNDAY IN LENT '25 C – WHOLE-HEARTED RECONCILIATION

What seems a very long time ago, the Texas Legislature passed into Tx Law what **were** called, “Three Strikes and You’re Out” laws. They were criminal justice statutes aimed at curbing crime by repeat offenders by making the 3rd felony conviction carry a mandatory life sentence. Even non-lawyers like me know a **felony** is the most serious category of crime, & on its face, it seemed to many that by the time you’ve committed **THREE** of the most serious kinds of crimes you maybe ought to be behind bars for the rest of your life. By the time you’ve perpetrated **THREE** felonies you probably weren’t in the mood or mindset to be rehabilitated or reformed & should be locked up forever.

What happened though, is that in their implementation, the burden of those laws fell disproportionately on people who couldn’t afford a decent lawyer, who were small fish in the big criminal ocean or whose crime was more self-destructive than a detriment to society. During the intervening years many of those laws have been repealed & many of those locked up set free. What was sold as *justice*, wasn’t *just*.

I thought about that again the other night @ the UnEarthed Event hearing the story of Lachlan Macquarie...Macquarie was the 5th Governor of New South Wales from 1810-1821, & w/ his wife Elizabeth a committed follower of Jesus. Macquarie saw his roles in the military & as Governor as avenues for his faith to impact the lives of others for good. Macquarie knew “convict settlement” was a dead end for the fledgling country being born under his watch. He also knew you just couldn’t *assume* today’s convict would forever be a threat to society. So he began a vigorous program of emancipation...freeing prisoners exiled from England & viewed as a perpetual “criminal class” – irredeemable & unwanted back on the shores of Britain. He understood the depths of his own forgiveness, & worked to bestow that on those he was charged to govern. Over 1500 convicts were freed by Macquarie...far more than freed by any other person in his position. To the question, *Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?* Macquarie answered, **“Yes”**.

But the problem remains: forgiveness & reconciliation do not come naturally to any of **us**. When someone hurts us or someone we love...our immediate response is usually a desire for *revenge*. Most calls for “justice” we hear in our post-modern world have an unmistakable required element of reprisal that is > settling the score. Retaliation but the starting point for reparations far exceeding cost. We hear God’s call to forgive & be reconciled to those who’ve hurt us as unnatural or impossible...Unnatural...? Yes. Impossible...never. It’s funny though...

I spent some time this week w/ my internet search engines fired up & you’d be surprised how many **Xns** there are who tell you there is no forgiveness w/o some form of groveling apology or transactional payback. No forgiveness w/o some preceding act of contrition. Let me just throw a couple of these up here: “*When we were **utterly helpless**, Christ came at just the right time & died for us **sinner**s. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is **especially good**. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us **while we were still sinners**. Since we have been (*justified - declared free of the guilt of sin*) **made right in God’s sight** by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored (*we were reconciled*) by the death of his Son **while we were still his enemies**, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of (*reconciled us to*) God.” – **Romans 5:6-11** I know you see it...I know we know...there is **NOTHING** in your/my or **ANYONE’S** being restored into a right relationship w/ the Father that is in **RESPONSE** to **OUR PRECEDING** act of contrition, groveling apology or transactional payback.*

Utterly helpless...still sinners...justified by the blood of Christ – reconciled while we were still his enemies... **God** steps into our world in Jesus Christ to rescue reconcile redeem restore & recreate all who **CANNOT** do so for themselves...Our lives our world our families our church & our witness to the world are **ALL** built on the fundamental inescapable truth...*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them...* – **2 Cor 5:19a**

But those who know...know...that’s not the whole of what Paul says...That’s not a full stop there...**God** was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them, & **he gave us** this wonderful message (ministry) of reconciliation. To the question, *Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?* Our only possible answer is...**“Yes”**. We who have experienced & know the forgiveness, grace & mercy of God...who have been rescued reconciled redeemed restored & recreated by Jesus Christ crucified/risen/reigning, are now empowered by him to forgive, reconcile, & restore as we have been forgiven, reconciled, & restored. In fact, forgiveness reconciliation are not optional parts of life in Christ. **“Then** the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. *That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers & sisters from your heart.”* We don’t get to pick & choose where forgiveness & reconciliation are lived out in our lives.

God calls us to offer the same magnitude of forgiveness we have received to those we see have sinned against us & to do good to both our loved ones & our enemies.

As followers of Jesus Christ, our lives ought to reflect the lavish gift of grace offered to us by God himself. **But** John...what if they continue to be hurtful? What if they take advantage of my graciousness? Sounds a bit like...**"Lord, you know what's happening to me. Please step in & help me. Punish my persecutors! ... It's for your sake that I am suffering."** Jeremiah reminds God that everything he's done has been in joyful loving obedience to God's command to speak God's word to God's people...to draw them away from destruction & into a restored relationship w/ God. But they will not & Jeremiah has the scars & the tears for all his efforts...**AND** Jeremiah accuses God of hanging him out to dry...leaving him in the lurch...walking away when he needed him most. I love God's response: **"If you return to me, I will restore you so you can continue to serve me. If you speak good words rather than worthless ones, you will be my spokesman. You must influence them; do not let them influence you!"**

The only question God ever asks of us...as those who have received his mercy, live restored in his love, have been rescued from sin death & the devil by Jesus' death, resurrection & rule, filled w/ the Holy Spirit & empowered by the same strength that raised Jesus from the grave... **The only question God ever asks of us...Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?** What are you doing w/ the abundant grace & love you've received? ... w/ the abundant blessings that fill your house & clog up your bank accounts? ... w/ the 24 hours of every day I grant life & breath on this earth? ... w/ the forgiveness reconciliation restoration that is always at work in your heart by my Spirit dwelling w/in you? *Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?*

Jeremiah's out there thinking he's all alone...God says Jeremiah is the one who walked away...So we continually return to the Father...our hand in the Son's & our hearts held by the Spirit...so that our words are good words...true words...forgiving encouraging hopeful joy-filled words...promising restoring reconciling words. That we are the influencers who by grace & restoration & reconciliation transform our homes schools workplaces neighbourhoods cities...against the tide of whatever the world decides to throw against us... *I will make you as secure as a fortified wall of bronze. They will not conquer you, for I am with you to protect & rescue you.*

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As you leave today, be specific & share w/ your neighbour...

TAKE IT HOME

Where & to whom Jesus is sending you to carry out his work of forgiveness & reconciliation?

(Be specific...where do you hear Jesus saying, "Go"?)

Prayer after the sermon...

Lord Jesus, we can offer nothing but our brokenness trusting you to heal and restore us in your love. We bring to your table only our need, our wide open hearts and hands trusting you to fill the emptiness that lingers. Love us so hard that we have no choice but to speak out and tell others you have redeemed us, and then work to forgive, reconcile & be restored to those from whom we are estranged...We pray in your Name. Amen...