

RETREAT: Forgivers

by Roger Neeb

Forgiveness of sins is the heart of Christianity. We usually include confession and absolution in our worship services. Why?

Forgiveness of sins is the heart of Christianity. Most churches prominently display the cross before their people. Why?

Forgiveness of sins is the heart of Christianity. Forgiveness of sins is the focus of this retreat.

That focus is worthy of great concentration and effort. Martin Luther wrote, “If the great, sublime article called the forgiveness of sins is correctly understood, it makes one a genuine Christian and gives on eternal life. This is the very reason why it must be taught in Christendom with unflagging diligence and without ceasing, so that people may learn to understand it plainly, clearly and discriminatingly. For to do so is the one, supreme and most difficult task of Christians. As long as we live here below, we shall have enough to do to learn this article. No one need look for anything new, anything higher and better.”

The retreat’s purpose is that we might be **forgiven** and **forgiver**—that we may **know** that we are forgiven and that we may convey forgiveness to those around us.

To reach these goals, forgiveness of sins in Christ will need to be the center of every aspect of the retreat. The retreat activities must cluster about a common center. The center is Christ.

To reach these goals leaders must be prepared. The leader’s first preparation is spiritual—examining one’s own self as Forgiven and Forgiver.

Leader’s Preparation

Take time to personally study the following Scripture passages: John 8:2-11; Rom. 8:1; Rom. 5:6-11, 8:31-34; 1 John 1:7-2:2; Is. 53:5-6; and Ps. 103:11-12. Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I confident that it applies to me?
- Do I rest assured in Christ?

Also read the book of Jonah, paying attention to the difficulties involved in being a carrier of forgiveness and the resistance we often have to being a forgiver.

Setting

Establish a setting which puts the focus on forgiveness in Christ.

- The cross or several crosses should be prominent. Perhaps a processional cross could be placed in the center of the area.
- Pictures of Jesus may be helpful.
- During the retreat, create paper banners focusing on us as forgiven and forgivers in Christ. Post them.

Bible Study: Jonah!

What comes to mind when the name “Jonah” is mentioned?

- A great fish! “Whale,” some say...
- Resurrection of Jesus! “As Jonah...so shall the son of man...three days and three nights...”
- Disobedience to God! “Go east young man!” No! West I’ll travel, thank you!

But why? Why so contrary? Why so determined? Why so unbending?

Some say Jonah was afraid to witness for the Lord. Really! Read the entire book of Jonah aloud to the group (not too fast). Let each listener jot down observations about Jonah to see if we can discover “why.”

Why was he so obstinate, deliberately doing the opposite of God’s instruction?

List observations on newsprint.

Perhaps it would help to know the following:

Ninevah, Jonah’s God-given destination, was the capital of Assyria. Assyria was synonymous with “mighty dread” to Israel and Judah (Harpers Bible Dictionary). Repeatedly, the Assyrians had attacked the Israelites. Samaria and Jerusalem had been besieged by Assyria. Assyrians had raided the people of God and removed property, herds and crops. They had enslaved many people.

Ninevah had grown very wealthy as others were impoverished. Ninevah had proudly paraded its captives through its streets.

The prophet Nahum echoes the exultant cry that went up from the Caspian Sea to the Nile River when Ninevah was finally destroyed in 612 B.C.

Does that change how you view Jonah's refusal to go to Ninevah?

Had you noticed that Jonah was a man who...

- was vengeful, delighted at the anticipation of God's retribution falling on Ninevah, desiring that they suffer as God's people had suffered?
- hurt, bore pain personally, was indignant at the pain his people had borne?
- did not want to see God be merciful or forgiving to this people?
- was sad at the repentance, the change of heart, of Ninevah?
- was disappointed in God's forgiveness and angry with God because of it?
- cried out to God in his own need, expecting and desiring mercy, but was not willing that God forgive Ninevah?

Jonah is an account of a man who pleaded with God for deliverance from danger brought by his own disobedience. He desired forgiveness for himself.

Jonah is an account of a man who, in spite of his deliverance, was unwilling or unable to forgive his enemies, to let go of his resentment or even to want them to be forgiven and spared.

Can you identify with Jonah?

Can you see some of those same feelings and thoughts in yourself?

Can you think of situations where you've observed the "Jonah Syndrome" in yourself and others?

Are there certain people you have trouble forgiving?

Are there certain kinds of sins you find especially difficult to forgive?

Pair up with another person and share your observation about Jonah and yourself. Then, together read Matthew 5:43-48 in which Jesus calls us to a new way of dealing with people. In fact, Jesus calls us to be "like God" in dealing with folks.

What difference do you think praying for your enemies would make? Enemies are any folks toward whom you have some resentment or who have hard feelings toward you.

Are there folks you find it difficult to pray for? What prevents you?

This retreat is to help us grow as both—forgiven and forgiver. Use it to discover God's forgiveness to you and to convey God's forgiveness to others.

Individual Meditation

Plan two periods of personal meditation during the retreat. The first, "I am Forgiven," should be some time after the Bible study. The second, "I am Forgiver," should be some time before the worship service.

Tips:

- 20 to 30 minutes is sufficient, depending upon age.
- Give copies of the suggested meditation guide to each.
- Read through each guide as instruction before beginning.
- Think! Reflect upon God's Word in depth.
- Physically separate yourself from others.
- Be absolutely quiet.
- Leaders should meditate, too.

Meditation 1: "I am Forgiven"

1 John 3:19-20 declares that at times we feel unforgiven, "our heart condemns us." Inside, we experience a sense of condemnation. Our "heart," or conscience, makes us uncomfortable. We think of past sins and are disturbed. At such times it is important to know that "God is greater than our heart." God determines that we are forgiven and says so in His Word. Our feelings do not determine our forgiveness and are an unreliable guide.

Read Is. 53:5-6. Of this passage, Luther says, "Christianity is nothing but the constant practicing of this passage, namely, being convinced that you have no sin although you have sinned, that your sins rest on Christ, who is the eternal Savior from sin, death and hell."

Reread the passage, substituting the first person singular pronouns. "He was wounded of **my** transgressions...etc."

- Sit back and think about it.
- Think of specific wrongs that bother you.
- Think of guilt that causes you pain.

- Imagine Jesus' stripes healing that pain.
- Say to yourself, "Christ has taken that sin," or "There is no sin where that sin was." I am **forgiven!**

Read Rom. 8:1. When "your heart condemns you," know that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." God says so in His Word. How can I best apply that to myself?

Read John 1:7-2:2. Read this three times, each more slowly than before. Write down sins that bother you, sins that make you feel guilty. When finished, write across the page, "The blood of Jesus His Son is cleansing me from these sins. I am forgiven!"

Meditation 2: "I am Forgiver"

In 2 Cor. 5:18 it says, "God reconciled us to Himself and gave us a ministry of reconciliation." He made peace between us and Himself through Christ. He does not get even. He forgives us. He gives us a ministry of reconciliation. He calls us to be "peacemakers," to be forgivers. We are forgivers when we tell of God's forgiveness in Christ and when we forgive those who wrong us.

Read Matt. 18:23-35. Consider: the faults you have, the ways you hurt others, the patience God has with you, how He forgives again and again. God's forgiveness can move a person to forgive. It can move us to forgive.

Read John 15:5. As the sap of the vine flows through the branch to produce grapes, so, "O Lord, let Your forgiveness to me produce the fruit of forgiveness in me to others." Imagine God's forgiveness coming to you from Christ and then through you to others.

List specific wrongs others have done to you that still bother you. Then write across the page, "Is. 53:5-6." Then read that passage, substituting the names of those who have hurt you. "He was wounded for John's transgressions. He was bruised for Mary's iniquities, etc."

Pray that the Lord would use you to be the forgiver to that person. You may need to confess your own bitterness, resentment or desire to get even before you can be a forgiver to that person.

Group Activity: Skits

People learn by doing. Acting out situations can be an effective way to learn by doing.

This activity is designed to relive a Biblical situation in which conflict, forgiveness and reconciliation were factors and to portray a contemporary situation that is similar.

Instructions: Divide into four groups. Have a prepared leader for each group. (Prepared=thoroughly familiar with the Biblical story.) Encourage the group to recall details of the story. The leader then highlights significant points while the group imagines the feelings of each primary character. The group then develops a three to five minute skit portraying a similar contemporary situation. Present the skits, asking the entire group for observations about resentment, forgiveness, ways of demonstrating forgiveness, etc.

Each group selects one of the following Biblical stories:

Joseph and brothers - Gen. 37:1-35; 41:46-57; 42:1-12; 45:44; 45:1-15. Notice Joseph's arrogance, his walk with the Lord, his giving his brothers opportunity for repentance. How does he demonstrate forgiveness? Notice the brothers' sin against Joseph and their guilt (42:21, etc.). See also their fear.

Jacob and Esau - Gen. 25:27-34; 27:1-45; 32:1-21; 33:1-16. Notice Jacob's sin, his reaction as the meeting with Esau drew near, his plan to appease Esau. Note Esau's initial reaction in 27:41. How does Esau demonstrate forgiveness?

Jesus and Peter - Luke 22:31-34; Mark 14:29; Luke 22:54-62; John 21:15-19. Notice Peter's confidence, his sin, his reaction to Jesus' look. What kind of look do you suppose it was? How did Jesus demonstrate forgiveness? Note Peter's response at Galilee.

When all skits are completed, have everyone summarize what they learned. Write down their thoughts on newsprint and post around the room.

Worship: Closing Communion Service

Some of the most significant retreat worship services are those planned by the group. Participants know what has been helpful to them, what has meant the most to them.

The group divides itself into two—half to plan and arrange the setting for the service and the other half to plan and conduct the service.

Group 1: Use imagination and ingenuity. Remember the theme: "I am Forgiven and Forgiver." Let the location be away from interruption. Decorate to remind worshipers of their retreat experiences. Surroundings affect worship.

Group 2: Use imagination, always thinking about what will help people worship God. Structure a service that gives opportunity to focus upon our forgiveness in Christ and upon His call to us to be forgivers.

Include Scripture readings and songs (use some that have been part of the retreat) and allow time for silent reflection and prayer. Include confession and absolution and opportunity to discuss specific ways each will demonstrate forgiveness to others after he/she has returned home. Demonstrate oneness (circle joining hands or something). Include the Sacrament that Christ may assure of forgiveness and give power to be a forgiver.

Closing Word

Remember Luther's words from his 1529 sermon in Marburg, "If the great, sublime article called the forgiveness of sins is correctly understood, it makes one a genuine Christian and gives on eternal life. This is the very reason why it must be taught in Christendom with unflagging diligence and without ceasing, so that people may learn to understand it plainly, clearly and discriminatingly. For to do so is the one, supreme and most difficult task of Christians. As long as we live here below, we shall have enough to do to learn this article. No one need look for anything new, anything higher and better."

It is only in Christ that we grow to be sure that we are forgiven and become true forgivers.

"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." "He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

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