

## **On Forgiveness** **by Pastor Jim Preisig**

The cliché is that absence makes the heart grow fonder. In terms of this church, it is true. Two weeks ago I was back preaching at the church I grew up in for their 50th Anniversary on their present site. And then last weekend I enjoyed with my family before the hectic fall schedule begins. We had the chance to worship at the Saturday night service (which was a joy), but I missed seeing all of you on Sunday morning. So it will be wonderful this weekend to be back in worship with you!

It was amazing to go back and preach at my home church. I saw some people that I have not seen in 24 years (they look like their parents, and so do I). My best buddy, David Scheopke, who grew up across the street, was present; as was my 8th grade math teacher, my first philosophy professor, people from the churches I had served in Wisconsin, and even Ron and Linda Hoher (who took a road trip from Lee's Summit to Wausau in order to be in worship). It was awesome! But in some ways the most remarkable aspect of the trip was seeing my Uncle Ben.

When I was about 4 or 5, my father had a falling out with his best friend and brother, Ben. They went years without speaking, even though they lived within blocks of each other. It was only when my father was dying in the hospital that Ben came and they tearfully reconciled; but my father died shortly thereafter and Ben remained distant and alienated from my family. It has been more than 40 years since I have had a conversation with my uncle, and then he showed up in worship to hear me preach.

We chatted before and after the service, and on the phone since my visit. We spoke of family history and other fairly safe subjects, and then he brought up the unmentionable – the enmity and alienation he shared with my father and family. I confessed to him that I never knew the cause, as my father never spoke of it; and he admitted that he either didn't know or couldn't remember why they had fought. He recalled only the tears he had shed for the love lost, the relationship broken. He thanked me for calling, and told me how proud he was to hear me preach.

Two thousand years ago Jesus said that if you have something against a brother or sister, before you come to the Lord to offer yourself, go and make amends. Why? Simply stated, if we refuse to forgive, we carry a burden that becomes an impediment in our relationship with the Almighty. We pray it every Sunday: "Forgive us ... As we forgive ..." You cannot BE forgiven if you are unwilling TO forgive.

So then, realizing the incredible cost of carrying anger and animosity in our hearts, how then do we forgive? First, allow me to offer a note of caution; and then a practical plan.

The word of caution: Forgiving another and letting go of the anger, hatred and hurt does not mean that you make yourself vulnerable to their further infliction of pain. There are predatory people who will abuse emotionally, physically and sexually. We must protect ourselves from them. Forgiveness does not mean that you allow another person the opportunity to re-inflict pain. It is possible to forgive, letting go of the anger and animosity, without leaving yourself at risk. Forgiveness sets you free from the ongoing pain of holding in your heart the memory of the affront; it ought not to leave you vulnerable to repeat offense.

Now the practical plan: Go first to God in prayer, for you will need His help to forgive those who have genuinely hurt you. Ask for His strength to lift the burden that will become crushing if you carry it too far or too long. Then let it go. Release the need and desire for retribution or humiliation. Begin to pray for those you have forgiven. And finally, by word and deed show that you no longer harbor the hurt. Be free to live and love. Then you will truly experience the forgiveness, love and life that is ours in Christ.