

# The Cancer of Bitterness

September 6, 2020

## Opening Prayer

## Scriptures for Today

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV)

Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11 (NRSV)

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NRSV)

## Exploring the Text

In both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, there is a clear imperative in how we handle the negative words and actions towards us.

- What imperative do you read in the above scriptures?
- When someone commits an act of injustice towards us, how difficult is it to put away all bitterness?
- Without realizing it, we can become trapped in bitterness through the cycle of justifying our actions based on the hurt we experience through someone else. How can we see ourselves clearly in the mirror?

In his book, *Why Forgive?*, Johann Christoph Arnold tells this story:

*Almost twenty years ago my father and I were asked by a colleague to visit an acquaintance who claimed she could no longer love. Jane's husband lay dying, and she longed to comfort him, yet something seemed to hold her back from within. Jane was by all accounts a blameless person: she was neat, meticulous, capable, hard-working, and honest – yet in talking with her it became clear that she was as unfeeling as a rock. She really could not love.*

*After months of counseling, the cause of Jane's coldness finally became clear: she was unable to forgive. She couldn't point to a single large hurt, but emotionally she was tied down – in fact, almost completely incapacitated – by the collective weight of a thousand small grudges.*

“The inability or refusal to forgive has become one of the great destructive elements in the modern world, both for individuals and communities. We hold grudges. We seek revenge. We cultivate victimhood as an identity. We let the past rule the present and future.”

L. William Countryman. *Forgiven and Forgiving*

- How does the inability to forgive affect our personal lives?
- How does our inability to forgive affect our communal life? In our homes? In our communities?
- How is our inability to forgive affecting our current political life in the U.S.?
- Do you think there are times in our history where we are more or less likely to forgive? What factors determine those times?

When we do not forgive someone, we hold onto the bad experience, to the pain, and to the trauma. We not only react to these things with negative feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment, we can also relive them and the initial emotions the injury caused. This can cause fear, depression, frustration, anxiety, self-hatred, and loneliness. Any of these can become a barrier between us and God and a barrier between us and others. It can cut us off from God's forgiveness; it can stifle our prayers, it can destroy our peace of mind. It's self-destructive, as we cling to our self-righteousness and the knife that stabs us. Those who caused the harm may not even realize that they've upset us. Or they may have thought it trivial and forgotten it long ago; but the pain still gnaws at our soul.

- Have you ever known anyone with cancer? How did it affect their life? How did it affect the lives of his/her immediate friends and family? Was he/she active or passive in their restoration to health?
- Our inability to give or receive forgiveness can strike us physically, emotionally, and spiritually as it becomes contained within us. How does a lack of receiving or giving forgiveness act like a cancer?
- How is a bitter heart like a corrosive? Like a rotting piece of wood?
- We may look fine on the outside, but inside a battle rages. Fred Craddock put it another way several years ago when he said, "Those of us who are at war with ourselves make casualties of everyone around us". Bitterness is a cancer that spreads. How does our bitterness change the relationships in our lives?
- Why do we so often choose bitterness over forgiveness? What prevents us from forgiving others and ourselves? What prevents us from accepting forgiveness?
- There is a line in a song from the artist, Sting:  
*So forget about the future and let's get on with the past.*  
How does our bitterness confine us to the past? Is this the life God has planned for us? Can we make a different choice? How?

Close in prayer. Spend a few moments visualizing the release of bitterness and grudges. This week, consider how bitterness may be confining your life.