



UNCHAINED: Finding Freedom in Forgiveness

Romans 8:31-39

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Washington Street UMC

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Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. I've worshipped here a few times at Washington Street since Rev. James was appointed here. It's felt nice to be back in this place where I was part of the weekly worship for almost four years while I was studying at Wesley Theological Seminary. There are a few of you who were here when I was the Student Assistant. I have a deep gratitude for the generosity and the kindness of this congregation. When I was a very green seminarian, just learning what it meant to prepare for weekly leadership in this space, one of the things I had to do each week was the children's message, when there were maybe only one or two children who would come down front. I lived in the parsonage just behind the church on Columbus Street. There were times when my children's message was developed between leaving Columbus Street and getting here to the Sanctuary.

When Rev. James asked me to be a part of this service today that centered on finding freedom in forgiveness, I wondered for a minute whether I should seek forgiveness for some of the very bad sermons I probably preached 30 years ago. I hope I have improved. The patient listening of those who were here 1982 to 1986 when I worked with Rev. Robert Knox was gracious. I will say, Thomas is not responsible for anything I say this point on, he has complete deniability.

Please join me in a word of prayer: Gracious God, may the words of my mouth, and our meditation on your word today, be acceptable in your sight, Lord, our Creator. Amen.

So if you have been here at Washington Street for any of the recent services, or you have turned to the homepage where the option of both written or to listen to those, you will have heard Pastor Thomas James offer very solid biblically grounded messages on various facets of finding freedom in forgiveness. He knows you as a community, and he knows you as individuals, and that gave him the ability to lean the messages into what he knows many of you needed to hear. But he's spoken about what all of us need to hear. The messages he shaped target are need to reconcile with other persons with whom we have conflict, to seek forgiveness, how we can carry hurt and anger toward communities, even communities like a church, and how we can seek to be unchained from the things that are addictions in our lives. How we can look for setting down those burdens that we carry.

Now, I think the fact that you can go back and re-read any of these messages, or re-listen to them, or share them with others through the Washington Street homepage (wsumc.com), is a real gift.

So what can I add to these conversation of freedom in forgiveness of being unchained in this process? It's pretty simple. All we have to do is forgive others, and ask for their forgiveness. Let

go of the hurts we carry. And find ways to forgive ourselves and ways to accept the forgiveness of God that has been offered to us in the work of Jesus the Christ. Should be very easy, right? No.

All that, in said and done in a month of sermon series, should take care of it. It won't.

Your Pastor has given you some sage advice and guidance, and opened a doorway. He's invited you to step through it. You might have already stepped through it and tried to practice some of those options that he's given you. But what he has suggested you around forgiveness is hard work, sometimes painful work. It's clearing the kind of mess that accumulates in the anti rooms of our lives. But luckily it doesn't have to be one and done. It does have an area of our need to continue to grow in discipleship. We have to try. We can do this work on forgiveness, we can try to unchain ourselves from those things that chain us from living fully, knowing that God's love for us includes God's forgiveness of us. That forgiveness from God frees us to take on the work that we need to do.

One of those things that he may have mentioned over this series, but I wanted to remind you, is that prayer, the prayer that most of us know best and repeat most frequently, the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer instructs us to forgive. To forgive others so that we might be forgiven. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

I was thinking of this range of topics, and I was struck by is that the coinage of forgiveness has more than one side. Many facets to it, but one that rose to the service for me is that one of the flip sides of forgiveness is apology. If I've wronged you, and we are attempting to mend our relationship, then I need to be ready to apologize and ask for forgiveness. It may include naming what part I had in breaking the relationship. I think that when many of us are in those settings where we have to move toward an apology, we tend to cringe a bit. We think, do I really have to do that?

Let me give you an example of a situation I lived through with a coworker. I was critical of her because there was a shared impression in our work setting that she just simply didn't do her job. When everyone else felt pushed to accomplish our efforts to be successful in recruitment and enrolling of students, she seemed to have this, *I'm only about half way committed* attitude. It really got under my skin. At one point, I, along with other coworkers, pretty much named what was bothering us. I may have blocked it from my memory, but I may have pretty much called her on it. Anyway, my criticism of her became known to her, and it really became a barrier to us working together. She wouldn't speak to me. As obvious as if we were both at a meeting, or in proximity in the dining room, she wanted nothing to do with me. It was that proverbial cold shoulder, and the look that went with it. My behavior toward her had created a barrier in our relationship. A distance that had not a way to cross at that point. This barrier, this break in our relationship, affected our ability to succeed at even small tasks that needed to be completed between our offices so that work could move forward. I realized this is a problem I had created. I realized I was judging her on an unfair standard. It required me to apologize to her for my criticism, and to ask for her forgiveness. I needed to ask for forgiveness so that our relationship could be mended. It was one of those really uncomfortable conversations. One of the things she did was identify that my treatment of her was unfair. I accepted that, and she accepted my apology. A little forgiveness happened on both sides of that relationship. Were we

best friends after that? No – we weren't meant to be best friends. But we could move forward as co-workers; we could move forward treating each other with more kindness in our interactions in our common purpose.

Listen again to Paul's words from Romans 8. Keep in mind this passage from Romans 8 is where Paul has been making a case for seven chapters of amazing theology that you can unpack for weeks and weeks in a Sunday School lesson. He's making the case for the church at Rome that Jesus Christ coming is the pure evidence of the love of God that has already done what is necessary to save us from sin, death, and the law. This passage, he has gotten to the closing discussion (if it were a court case, this is his closing argument), and these are some of those verses.

Paul writes to the church in Rome, "And what then shall we say to this: If God is for us, who is against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present or things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Nothing – nothing in all of creation. We have a Creator God, we have a creation; you and I are creatures of that creation. So when Paul writes, "nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God," it means that in our strange human activity and creativity, we can't separate ourselves from the love of God. Not even you, not even I. Sisters and brothers in Christ, here is the good news: Paul's acclamation in Romans is that nothing can separate us from this already established present unending, unconditional love of God. Nothing that has been declared as a restriction or a legalism, neither deadly things nor legal things, nothing in all of creation – nothing that we set up in ourselves as a false impediment, or use as an excuse for accepting God's free gift of forgiveness. This gift of forgiveness that is shown to us in the teaching, healing, and ministry of Jesus is a gift that is shown in the sacrifice of Christ's life on the cross and it affirms even death will not stand between us and the love of God because death is conquered in the resurrection of Christ. So, accept God's gift of forgiveness, which has been waiting for you from the beginning.

A little later in our service, you will be invited to come forward to a station here at the top of each of the aisles, have a small dab of oil placed on your forehead. This anointing with oil is a sign of the forgiveness we already have through God. The anointing does not cause or enact forgiveness, it's a sign – a reminder for us of what God has already done. It's a way for us to embody and see in one another that we are not alone in the need for God's forgiveness. We are not alone in our need to be a forgiving and a forgiven people. To be unchained, to find freedom in forgiveness, is a gift that God offers to the newest visitor of this church who has just walked in this Sunday, to the dedicated member of the church who has been attending here 40 or more years, or to the pastor who preaches week to week. I am ready to take this new step in forgiveness and accepting God's forgiveness, and I pray that you are too. Amen.