

Living Inside Out: The Dangers of Rear View Mirror Driving

Proverbs 3:1-8

Intro

Last week we waded into the waters of forgiveness as we listened to the story of a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. We discovered how she heard two voices: one that said she should just give up and be killed, while the other whispered for her to trust in God. She listened to that latter voice and upon realizing that she was not only alive, but that God heard her (her words), she dedicated herself to leaning upon the Lord through prayer.

Now mind you, this dedication was in no small part because she remained in hiding...for months. But she prayed, and she prayed, and she prayed, seeking God's leading for her life. What she ultimately heard was a whisper to trust in the prayer that Jesus taught, which includes the following (as written in Matthew): 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.', which is followed by, 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'

As we started to talk about last week, we all know that this call is, well, it's hard. But as Immaculee heard through the whispering of the Holy Spirit, our responsibility is not to edit the call of our Lord, but to follow it.

The following passage reminds us of that in several ways. It also concludes with an important reminder: following the Lord (which, as we have been talking about, also includes forgiving those who have wronged us) will ultimately heal and refresh us. The scripture reads this way.

Proverbs 3:1-8

³My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ² for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

³ Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Philippians 4:4-9

Intro

The passage that we are about to hear contains the following statement: 'do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

Now many of us hear that and the thought that comes to mind is, ‘don’t worry about anything? Seriously?! That’s not able to happen’. Which ultimately means what? It won’t happen because our doubt ends up creating the very reality that we were trying to avoid.

Why is that?

I think at least part of the reason is because too many of us have allowed our past to become the driving force of our future. We look to the past and see some variation of pain, hardship, and difficulty ...and that sightline (garnered while dwelling on the past) leads us into a future that seems awfully similar to the past that we were lamenting.

So, using forgiveness (or as the case may be, the lack thereof) as the illustrative example that causes many of our futures to seem remarkably similar to our pasts, how does that shift begin to take place? The scripture reads this way.

Philippians 4:4-9

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

‘Living Inside Out: The Dangers of Rear-View Mirror Driving’

When it comes to driving, one of the most important lessons that I was taught was that I need to know what’s going on all around me. It’s one of the first lessons of a defensive driving. I can absolutely hear my driving instructor Matt Meltzer (who was more than a slightly colorful character even to the point of referring to himself as, ‘The World’s Best Driving Instructor’...Google him and you’ll see that I am not joking) I can hear him pontificating about how I need to keep a look out for all the, well, let’s just say that he used two individual letters to describe drivers who were not as responsible as he was teaching me to be.

That was lesson one.

And yet, there was also another lesson which came not more than a breath after the first lesson was offered, and it was this: don’t drive from the rear-view mirror. His point was this: if you are focused on the stuff that’s happening behind you, you’re not going to be able to pay enough attention to what’s happening in front of you, which will ultimately turn you into one of the people whom he referenced earlier: you know, those people who we were looking out for in the first place.

How does that pertain to forgiveness?

Because if we end up being so focused on what happened back there, we will end up moving forward in ways that never quite escape the shadow of the pain that happened...back there, which necessarily means that our future is perpetually colored by the events that happened...back there.

When we think about Immaculee's story (the story that we were introduced to last Sunday), she was on her way to living that out...and again, we wouldn't blame her. Her family, her neighbors, her community was summarily slaughtered, so the idea of forgiving those who had committed so many evil acts...no, that couldn't happen. It wouldn't be just.

So she skipped over those parts of her prayer life so as to not be hypocritical.

Did you hear what was just said? She skipped over those parts of her prayer life.

How about that time? Did you hear it?

If you are thinking that I am angling toward the fact that she had a 'prayer life', you are spot on correct. My hunch is that many of us look at a responsibility from the Almighty like forgiving others and get pretty quickly to a place of, 'I can't do this. Even if I wanted to, I can't.'

Which is true. Living inside out through the forgiveness of others, especially in those occasions when we are left truly damaged, is not something that we are able to realize of our own efforts. We need to let go of the mentality and belief that we can do it on our own... just like we need to let go of the mentality and belief that forgiveness is impossible. We need to begin to release our grip on these mindsets and surrender to the God whom we pray, 'not my will, but Your will be done.'

If we are unable to begin (just begin!) to release that grip, we will move forward with our perspective always looking toward the past.

But if we are able to surrender, even just a little bit, if we are willing to listen to that voice that whispers for us to trust in the Creator of all (which, as we have been talking about, is achieved in unique and different ways for each of us because we are all blessed with unique and different interests, skills, talents) we will begin to appreciate the connection that God longs to have with us, and not only appreciate it, but be led and fed through it.

Prayer is going to be different for all of us: we are all unique creations of the Almighty who are living lives that are different than the person who is sitting next to you. But prayer, connection with the Divine in however that manifests itself through your interests, skills, and talents, needs to be there in order to open ourselves to hearing the whispers of God's Spirit.

If not, there will be way too many days when we move forward even as we stay tethered to what has happened in the rear-view mirror.

So let's talk about what forgiveness is so that when we begin to hear that whisper of the Holy Spirit we are able to move in ways that are...faithful.

Scripturally, the Greek word that we translate as ‘forgiveness’, literally means ‘to let go’. Sound familiar? Sound like another step in surrendering? I thought so too.

Forgiveness is letting go.

That does not mean that we condone the offense, pretend that the offense never happened, or allow others to take advantage of us. A wrong was committed. An injury was incurred. It is now a part of our experience. And again, there are some individuals who have inflicted this harm, from our perspective, knowing what they have done.

But God has shown us that this does not need to become our defining reality that rudders us toward the shoal where we feel grounded.

Not my will but Your will be done. Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, our sin, as we also have forgiven our debtors, those who have trespassed and sinned against us. Forgiveness is letting go of resentment and the claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.

Why should we listen to this whisper of God’s Spirit?

Yes, because we have been called to, but even if you struggle with that rationale, there are still other blessings that will begin to manifest themselves in our lives.

Examples? Why yes, I have some!

Research suggests that forgiving others can make people feel happy, especially when we forgive someone to whom we feel close. Now a blessed life is not necessarily the stereotypical worldly happy life, but are we really going to look the gift horse in the mouth?

Individuals who foster healthy forgiveness in their lives experience greater improvements in depression, anxiety, and hope than those who don’t.

Forgiveness improves our physical health. For example, when we dwell on grudges, our blood pressure and heart rate spike. There are even studies that suggest that holding grudges might compromise our immune system, making us less resistant to illness. That’s not good.

When we forgive? Our stress levels drop, and the opportunity to live a healthier life increases.

Healthy forgiveness opens the door to creating, building, or repairing relationships with co-workers, friends, and loved ones.

Forgiveness models a life to our children that ultimately allows them to have a greater sense of self (not because of anything they did but instead because of who God created them to be, how God created them to live).

Forgiveness allows us to be more connected to people who we don't know, showing and sharing kindness with those whom we come into contact with (could the world use more of that reality? Just a little bit).

Are you hearing some of this? Are you hearing some of the realities that will manifest themselves in your life as we begin to surrender to our Creator by listening God's Spirit by being in connection with Him through the interests, skills, and talents that we have been blessed with?

Said another way, are you hearing who forgiveness benefits?

It's not the person who initiated the offense. That may happen...but that's a side benefit.

No, forgiveness (and again, I mean healthy, God-led forgiveness) benefits the person who was wronged, so that we are able to stop looking in the rear-view mirror of life and start really seeing what is coming up along the horizon.

What are you holding on to? What do you need to begin to surrender so that we might be able to be led to forgiveness through God's Spirit?

Not my will but Your will be done.

Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, our sin, as we also have forgiven our debtors, those who have trespassed and sinned against us.

What are you holding on to?

As I thought about that question in my own life, one of the areas that I very much hold on to in a negative way is Austin's diagnosis. As I have talked about before, once the diagnosis was made (which was when he was just shy of 1 year of age), that all of the realities and expectations of what could be for his life went out the window. I would be lying if I said there weren't still parts of every day when I have dug into that pain and hurt. His life isn't fair. Sadness mixed with a little bit of anger feels like a drink that I know way too well.

And at different points and in different ways I am able to be reminded of how blessed I am because of Austin, who is who he is, in no small part, because of the disease that is a daily part of his life. And in those moments, I start to let go, start to forgive, I don't even know, God? The world? The disease? My genetic makeup? All of it and everything else? I start to let go because I am able to hear that whisper that there is a still better way and instead of looking in the rear-view mirror and what was and what could have been, I am able to see what is and what is about to become.

That doesn't mean that everything is gumdrops and lollipops, but I am still able to recognize the blessing that comes from the Divine.

We need to surrender, surrender to God. Listen for His voice through who you are and start to respond to it by letting go...by forgiving.

God wants us to live inside out. Let go...even just a little bit.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious God, this whole living inside out thing, yeah, we need You to have a snowballs chance of making this happen. For many of us that maybe it's in regard to forgiveness. Lord, it is part of who You want us to be and how You want us to live. Lead us Lord, lead us through the blessings You have bestowed upon us to hear Your whisper so that we might begin to stop focusing on what we still see in the rear-view mirror, letting go in healthy ways that let Your love and blessing flow in even greater ways. Lord, we need You to let go, to surrender. Let it happen, even just a little bit, today...right now. Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.