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Speak...Repentance

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It's as profound a story of repentance and forgiveness as I know. I had known Kevin and his wife Sally for several years. I was their pastor. I had confirmed their kids. I had worked with Kevin on a lot of church projects, and I'd been in Bible studies with Sally. To say that I knew them would have been an understatement. From every indication, their family had it all together. And so, I was shocked - more than a year later to find out that Kevin and Sally's marriage was crashing and burning. Actually, Sally called me to tell me that the marriage was "blowing up," that Kevin had moved out, and they were in crisis mode.

All that they had built over two decades – and then some – was imploding, exploding, and overloading. It was a mess.

The months that followed were filled with the painful unraveling of a marriage fabric that had taken almost 25 years to sew together. And thinking that their kids, Rachel and Cory, by now both in college, were beyond the effects of watching their mom and dad's marriage fall apart was a pipe dream. Everyone paid a price.

Finally, Kevin and Sally divorced. The marriage died, and they buried it. It was done.

But that was not the end of the story.

A handful of years after that, I received a phone call from Rachel. There was a hint of new life in the voice that I remembered hearing painfully talking of all that had gone on. Rachel told me that she had some news - some good news to share with me.

Kevin, her dad, was getting remarried.

There was a pause. I was grateful trying to absorb the news.

Rachel went on to say that her dad, after all he had been through in those terrible years, had fallen in love again. Somehow, amazingly, Kevin had allowed himself to love and be loved once again.

I told Rachel that I thought that was great. But I admit, it was half-hearted.

I felt grief and loss because I had more memories of Kevin and Sally together than apart.

It had been difficult for me to wrap my head around the news that Kevin and Sally were ending a decades-long relationship, and so, another wedding was just beyond what I could process.

But if Kevin was happy and his daughter, Rachel, was happy, then there was some redemption.

Then Rachel paused and told me some more news. She told me that her mother, Sally, had also found someone and had fallen in love. She asked me if I was sitting down.

Rachel then told me that her mom was getting remarried as well. I hadn't sat down, but when she told me that, I did sit down.

I stopped for just a moment and tried to consider the dynamics going on in this family as well as process my own stuff after having gone through so much with them through the years.

It was one of those rare moments in my life when I was nearly speechless—without words. Imagine that!

Rachel and I talked for a couple of minutes about how happy she was watching her dad fall in love and watching her mother fall in love.

And then something happened. I don't know whether it was something she said or the tone of her voice...but I had the growing sense that Rachel was leaving something out. There was more to this than just a heart-breaking-heart-mending moment.

That's when I asked Rachel this question: Rachel... Is your dad getting remarried...to your mom? And is your mom getting remarried to your dad?"

There was a pause...and then Rachel said, "Yes."

So it was that I drove to Stillwater one Friday night in the middle of October some years ago. I parked my car in front of an old Victorian Bed and Breakfast and went inside to gather with a family to reunite two people who had waded into the deep waters of repentance and forgiveness, and asked the question, How many times must I practice repentance, and how many times must I forgive?

Only to discover the answer: "Just this one more time."

We're in a series that we're calling Speak. God has been speaking since the beginning... God speaks... creation into existence. Freedom to the captive.

Hope, love, and accountability to a new nation of people.

God speaks... truth to power, reorienting history, redeeming human lives, restoring all things
God speaks resurrection... and new life comes to life!

God has not stopped speaking to us. God is speaking in our time, into our stories.

God speaks ... using the ancient words of the scriptures, the prophets, the unassuming, the unexpected, even the forgotten in order to guide us.

Through our series, we've been learning how to Speak Justice, Speak Peace, Speak Courage.

Today: think about what it means to speak Repentance. And because repentance and forgiveness are two halves of a whole... we're going to turn to a powerful story in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus' dear friend, Peter, came to Jesus with one of the best-loaded questions any of us have ever asked – ever! "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, Peter, but I tell you, seventy times seven." Let me read the story for you from Matthew 18:21-35.

At that point, Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"

Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven. [70x7]

"The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got underway, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

"The poor servant threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance, and I'll pay it all back.' Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

"The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed

him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!'

"That servant threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance, and I'll pay it all back.' But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

"The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?' The king was furious and had the servant locked up until he paid back his entire debt. And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy."

God has a passion for repentance and forgiveness! Peter was probably looking for an easy way out. Don't we all? Maybe he was thinking that revenge came after the seventh act of forgiveness. Nope, that's it! I'm done! No more.

Maybe Peter thought that after he had expressed forgiveness seven times, he could finally just let loose and take to the cleaners, whoever it was with whom he had issues.

But Jesus said not seven times, but seventy times seven. Quick math tells us that 70 x 7 is roughly 490. 490 times Peter should forgive.

But the next question that we have to ask is this: does that mean that at 491, we don't have to forgive anymore?

Is there really a numerical limit to forgiveness? Of course not! Jesus teaches us that forgiveness is limitless. Jesus is trying to make a point here with large numbers. This is hyperbole. 70 x 7 is meant to be a number at which we could never arrive.

The message of the passage for us today as 21st-century Christians is that repentance and forgiveness are part of God's vision for how we live our lives.

There are three common questions that come out of this passage. If we're willing to be honest about the fact that we all have conflict...and if we're all honest about our pride and denial and our need to practice repentance - which creates the path for

forgiveness – then I think we've got something here worth investigating.

What if we believe that we don't have anything to repent of? Nothing to be forgiven for?

Well, if we're even asking the question, then we might want to pay attention to why we're asking. Thinking that I don't need to practice repentance has never served me well. Ever.

All that points to is denial with a healthy dose of pride to go along with it.

Think about it...When I have hurt someone, and I need to make amends but fail to do so – when I fail to practice repentance, all I'm doing is denying the fact that a relationship is broken. It's usually pride standing in the way.

When relationships are strained and misunderstandings happen, it usually takes people on every side of the issue to own their part of the problem. Practicing repentance creates a path to practice forgiveness.

Peter asked a very legitimate question. If someone sins against me, how often should I forgive?

People usually ask something like, "If someone hurts me, what should I do back to them?"

Here's the thing: If someone hurts me, even if they haven't expressed repentance, and I take the posture of forgiveness, that changes everything. That's called subversive love. Jesus talked about this when he talked about turning the other cheek.

What if I believe that I cannot forgive someone who has hurt me?

Denying forgiveness from someone who has asked for it puts us at the mercy of the destructive power of self-righteousness.

When I am caught up in my own self-righteousness, I am set up for relational pain. If someone has hurt us and asks for forgiveness, but our pride gets in the way, and we refuse, we are held hostage to a never-ending spiral of destructive behavior.

Every Sunday for nearly a decade, members of the Landisville, PA, Mennonite Church have prayed for a son of their congregation.

Every month, for nearly a decade, they sent him a small sum of money, and every month, some of them visited him.

Prayer, money, and visits - fairly typical examples of congregational caregiving, one might suppose.

What's not typical is that nearly a decade before that, after a meal with relatives on a calm Sunday afternoon, 14-year-old Keith Weaver killed his parents, Clair and Anna May, and his sister, Kimberly.

The unfathomable horror of the crime and the loss of lives rocked the Weavers' family, church, and community to the core.

In the middle of their grief and disillusionment, however, members of the Landisville congregation got busy. They helped clean the house where the murders happened, they established a legal support committee to care for Keith's needs so that the surviving brother and sister wouldn't have to do that, and they founded a "seventy times seven" fund to collect money for his expenses.

They studied grief, forgiveness, and victimization in Sunday school and sermons, calling on the expertise of area chaplains and counselors.

A year after the tragedy, they held a memorial service to lament the loss of their loved ones and to recommit themselves to the journey of forgiveness.

All these years later, they are continuing that journey through prayers, financial help, and visits to Keith in prison.

"Forgiveness is an act of God's grace," says Landisville pastor Sam Thomas. "You don't forgive and forget; you forgive again and again and again."

What if I believe that God cannot forgive me for the things I've done?

Honestly, if we believe that God is somehow unable to forgive every one of us fully and completely, then, no amount of repentance is ever going to get us anywhere.

I am amazed at the number of people who truly think that God, even on a very good day, cannot forgive all that they've done on a bad day. There is a pervasive belief among many that God is just waiting for us to mess up.

And when we do, God is just waiting to squash the life right out of us for being so bad.

I've said this before, and I'll say it again: if God wanted to "do us in" for missing the mark and not measuring up, then God could have done that a long time ago.

None of us have come this far except for the grace and love of an amazing God.

In Romans 5:6, we have these magnificent words to reassure us: *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."*

The grace of God in Jesus Christ says we are set free from the bondage of sin and death. There are consequences to our actions, of course, but there is nothing we have ever done or will do that is greater than God's ability to forgive us.

Kevin and Sally came to understand that in some profound ways in their life. Kevin and Sally's story is remarkable ... Let's give it that much.

But I want to be really clear: It's their story.

Not all stories about love lost and love found roll out like their story. God's pervasive and extravagant love would have covered them completely in any other version of their life story.

For them, repentance and forgiveness made a way for God's story to be seen and told through them.

And I'll never forget that moment in that Bed and Breakfast in Stillwater, MN...how Sally, when she took Kevin's hands and spoke her promises to him again, looked deeply into the eyes of the man to whom she had been married for two decades and then some spoke powerful words of repentance, and forgiveness.

And somehow, we all knew that at least in this one instance we were catching a glimpse of the power of repentance – acknowledging our ability to make a royal mess of things, and the pure joy of forgiveness – a reflection of the extravagant power of God setting things right, helping us to live in new ways.