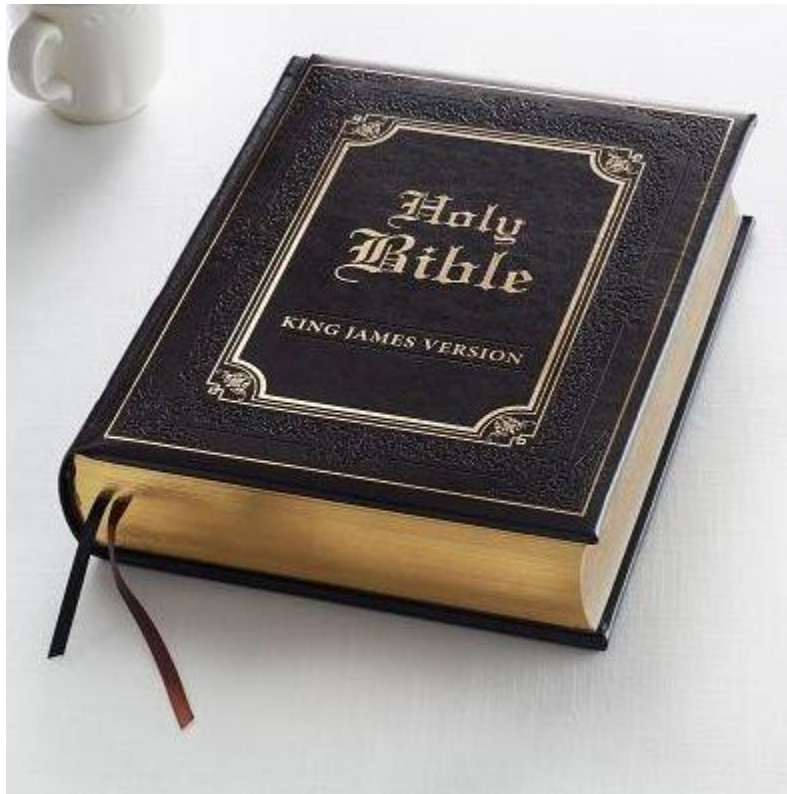


Sermon, September 13, 2020

Scriptures: Matthew 18:21-35; Romans 14:1-12
“Family Survival: Through the Eyes of Jesus”

By Rev. Dr. Brian Jones



My family was cleaning out my family home a few weeks ago and found some old text books. Not mine, but we had someone give them to us, or they came in a library sale, I can't remember. I hadn't looked at them in what, forty years perhaps. But oddly, when I leafed through them, I remember all of the pictures in the book. It was the visuals that caught my imagination and that I remember. A lot of memories came folding back just because of the illustrations.

Our family Bible was the same way. I don't know if anyone of you had one of these, maybe we all had the same one, we had a Bible about the size of a chair that sat on our coffee table. Have you seen these or have one? It was so heavy that the coffee table sagged a little bit? See, that's a good sign of our faith, when your Bible is bigger than your table. My mother would never have settled for a Bible on her phone. Can't lay your phone on the table and impress anyone.

But what I remember most about that Bible was the incredible illustrations, classic painting in the Bible, and I would leaf through it fascinated by these incredible paintings. I was captivated by them, especially the Velazquez painting of the crucifixion.

What illustrations from your childhood still captivate your memory? I have another one. It's this one. Now, you have to look closely at it, but this is a satire of the first vaccinations. Edward Jenner came up with the brilliant idea that if someone were to be given a small amount of cow pox, the body would build up antibodies to the smallpox disease. He was widely ridiculed for this, as you can see in the picture. People are injected with cow pox and instead of being protected from small pox they are growing cows out of various parts of their body. It's satire, of course, but seeing this in third or fourth grade made an impression on me, its satirical to the point of being outlandish.

Thankfully, Jenner proved to be correct, and vaccines were invented. Jenner virtually eradicated small pox and, of course, vaccines continued over the centuries to battle diseases and keep us safe. Many diseases that once harmed children are now an anomaly because they have vaccines that protect them, they build up antibodies and an immunity to the disease.

Of course, as we continue to do our best to stem the pandemic, vaccines are back in the news. Now, effectiveness, fast track, who develops, etc., is perhaps better saved for a discussion on another day. But can we at least agree that we're glad that Jenner came up with a way to help the body build up immunities to protect it from disease?

I've been thinking lately at how helpful those antibodies, that immunity, would be if we not only had it for our physical body but for the body of Christ, as well. We are in a new series that we have titled *Family Survival*. Hopefully this will be applicable to your own family, but our main thrust here is how do we survive as the body of Christ? As the family of God? I want to say that recent events of this year have put a strain on our relationship as the family of God. We have been isolated from one another out of rhythm unable to do certain ministries to connect, worship, pray, and be a part of one another. But the truth is it's not just this season. Family always takes work, and there will always be a strain on the family of God because we are a holy eternal entity plopped down in the middle of a fallen, ever changing temporal world. It's never easy for us to be a part of the family of God. While our particular crises may be unique, the strain put on the family of God is not. It's always been there and will be there until the final trumpet blows and Jesus returns.

So how do we survive in the body of Christ? How do we resist sin and become a sure reflection of the body of Christ?

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus helps us see one of the foundational keys to being able to survive. He introduces us to a vaccine, a way to build up the antibodies needed that we might become all we are to be and able to resist the illness that often surrounds us.

Here, Jesus unequivocally says we need a vaccine of forgiveness. Jesus clearly states here if the body of Christ is to survive, if the family of God is to survive, it must be based on a foundation of forgiveness, because it's forgiveness that allows us to resist much of the evil we have in the world.

And it's a place where we are incredibly resistant. Forgiveness seems to be one of those things we are all in favor of until we have to do it. It's a great idea in theory. But we are so unwilling to forgive. Instead, we will rationalize as to why we don't have to forgive. As if when Jesus tells us to forgive, He couldn't possibly be talking about the situation we find ourselves in or the people we have to deal with.

This is our second message in the last few weeks on the need for forgiveness. Why is it so crucial? Well, forgiveness is one of the things binding us together. In our liturgy of communion, there is a place where we confess our sin and what we have against one another. Why? Because if we are sick with resentment, how can we be one with one another and with Christ? Being unwilling to forgive destroys our witness to the world. How will the world believe in forgiveness when we are unwilling to forgive one another, when we have animosity and hate for those we are bound to? It destroys and hampers our ministry, as well. Just as the body cannot function at its best when it's ill. How can we as the body, how can you with your family or close loved ones function when we are full of resentment?

The only way, Jesus says, to protect ourselves is to be able to forgive. It becomes the antibody through which love and grace are able to bind us together, through which we are able to minister and witness to the world. Would we all, Jesus says, not better off if we were immune, had built up antibodies to being offended and resentment. In a world where being offended at everything seems to be the order of the day, has there ever been a better time for the church to be a witness to being immune to offense and resentment?

Jesus says in this passage forgiveness is the vaccine that builds up that immunity. But how do we do it? Jesus says first, take a long hard look at yourself. That's one of the points in Jesus parable. Everyone here owes a debt. Everyone has sinned. Scripture says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That means you and I, we forgive because none of us really stands in the place of superiority. We have all been forgiven, we have all done the wrong thing at some point. One of the ways we are able to resist being offended and harboring resentment is we have all made mistakes. Being able to see ourselves clearly is a first step to being able to forgive.

Secondly, we have all been forgiven. I read an author once who said the reason I am able to forgive even the worst offenses is that I know God has forgiven me of far worse. Isn't that what Jesus says here? *I have*

forgiven you of so much, how could you not forgive? For me, that has been one of the most powerful evidences against harboring offense to others. Because of that picture, I have never had to take an offense, a hurt to the Cross. Jesus took every one of mine, every one of yours, to the Cross. I made those wounds, I placed that crown of thorns, my sin drove the spikes into the wood. How can I dare to hold any hurt, any resentment, when I have been forgiven so much? How can we forgive? Because I know in the end it's nothing in comparison to what Jesus has done for me.

Thirdly, it's about the Lordship of Jesus. Look at Romans. Jesus says it is not your similarities that make you the body of Christ. It's how you love one another in spite of your differences. No, it's not easy. But in this time, in this season, is it not the message we as the church need to share? Not only is forgiveness preferable, but in Christ Jesus, it is possible. Amen.