Sermon for July 29, 2018 – "Hurt People"
17th Sunday in OT, Year B – Texts: 1 Thessalonians 5, Matthew 18:21-35
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There's an old adage that "hurt people hurt people." What that means is that those who've been emotionally damaged tend to inflict their hurt and pain on other people. It happens in lots of ways. Hurt people are often frustrated and depressed because past pain continually spills over into their present consciousness. Hurt people often transfer their inner anger onto their family and close friends. Hurt people interpret every word spoken to them, every action done to them through the prism of their pain. Hurt people often portray themselves as victims. Hurt people often alienate others and wonder why they're alone. In many instances, they may not even be aware of why they're continually frustrated or depressed because they've dealt with pain by compartmentalizing it, suppressing it, or plastering over it with other things over time. Hurt people often occupy themselves with busyness, with achievements and accomplishment as a way of compensating for low self-esteem. Hurt people often attempt to "self-medicate" with entertainment, drugs, alcohol, etc. as a way of dealing with their pain. I'm sure many of us are familiar with the term "retail therapy"? Hurt people are often self-absorbed with their own pain and are unaware that they are hurting others. They're often insensitive to other people because their emotional pain limits their capacity for empathy and self-awareness. So, there's a sense here for me that part of this is about awareness. I keep reminding myself this. It's a hard lesson, wrought with frustration because when people hurt us our first instinct is anger. We've all been there haven't we? We know that not reacting and taking offense is undeniably hard. Especially when you really did do your best but believe that your best will never be good enough. But, we also know that releasing anger on others only causes more pain for ourselves in the end.

Have you noticed lately that everywhere we look people are offended? We see it all the time. Someone posts something on Facebook or Twitter or some other form of social media and people will inevitably come out of the woodwork to say how offended they are. We take other's projections as if they're a direct attack on us even when it isn't. It takes strength and courage to take a step back and remind ourselves that other people's reactions are less about **us** as they are about **them**. Our reactions stem from past experiences. Experiences that lead to assumptions we firmly believe are true though they might not be. They may just be preconceived notions projected onto others in order to protect our ego. The most hurt and traumatized among us will do almost anything to protect what little self-respect is left. This is how reality becomes contorted. The looking glass morphs becoming more and more like those weird mirrors we used to see at carnivals. People will hold on to whatever version of reality serves their belief system and they'll do it as often as they need to until they believe it.

The go-to coping mechanism is to rationalize the reactions, creating stories that make those actions seem okay. As one writer put it: "What weakens us is feeling offended by the deeds and misdeeds of our fellow men. "Our self-importance requires that we spend most of our lives offended by someone." So, what to do?

Well, I think part of this is about awareness.   Awareness of the ways in which, and the extent to which, others around us are hurting.   But this is a two-way street so, it's an awareness of how much **we** are hurting, the extent to which we ourselves have been hurt, and how we may have hurt others. I say this because if we hold up a mirror every time we shun another person or cast blame we can clearly see that who we're really angry at is ourselves.   Think about it. We've all experienced pain. We know pain like the dull edge of a knife. It's around us every day. We're almost always suffering with some sort of pain; physical, spiritual, emotional.   And when we feel it we desperately need to unload it, to get rid of it some**where** else, to dump it on some**one** else, thus we act thoughtlessly at times. We lash out, we say things we don't mean, and we take anyone within the blast radius along with us, even the people closest to us, those we love most. Most of the time, we don't mean what we say, right? But we say it anyway because of the relief that we experience when we say it.   We don't necessarily want to hurt each other but we simply have no clue how to let go of our own hurt without projecting it onto others. And so, we cause others to suffer.   And we do so because – let's face it – nobody wants to be alone at the proverbial pity party. I mean, drama is highly addictive. Stress is like a virus. It starts in that reptilian part of our brain, the reactive "r-system" part of our brain. the least evolved part of our brain where that whole "fight or flight" thing takes place. It causes a surge of extremely intense hormones to slurp our rational logic through its curly straw of reaction. And, as we all probably realize, it's easier to **react** than it is to **respond**. Responding rationally is hard, almost to the point of impossibility.   Reacting is a million times easier than responding.   When we feel attacked it's instinctual to put our backs up against the wall. It's what human beings have done since we first started walking upright.

Each of us has lived a unique life. We've endured our own sets of struggles and successes. Some of us have had life-long stability, others path of life has always been dangerously close to the edge. We know this. Rationally. Intellectually. We know that others have had it tough as well, maybe even tougher. But allowing ourselves to get out of control when someone projects all their stuff onto us, all their pain, fear and anxiety, is really hard **not** to do. And, tip-toeing around another person's edges out of fear of how they'll react is no way to live life. In fact, it's nearly impossible! It's as the tag line from the 2004 movie *Crash*, that won the Academy award for best Picture, read "Moving at the speed of life, we're bound to collide with each other."

So, it seems to me that we need to find another way. A way where we're able to find some sort of peace with ourselves and others. Why? Because if we're at peace with ourselves, we don't feel the need to spew venomous emotions onto those around us. If we're at peace with ourselves, we can be more aware of the hurt people around us. And here's where the other part of this comes in...Can anyone guess what it is?   If you believe it's forgiveness – you're absolutely right. Hurt people need to forgive. Hurt people need to be forgiven, especially if we're the hurt person. Let me say this plainly… We need to forgive others. We need to forgive ourselves. Some may ask, How? Well, here's where faith enters the picture. As far as forgiving others Jesus, in answer to Peter's question of **"how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?",** tells us **"not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."** It's been said that this is Bible-speak that we should take to mean that we should always forgive, and this is true. But, as one theologian points out, the point that Jesus is trying to make is not a matter of math or linguistics but on the nature of forgiveness.

Jesus is saying that whoever counts has not forgiven at all. The kind of forgiveness that Jesus is talking about is beyond all calculation. And, as far as forgiving ourselves, well, Paul tells us plainly that there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He also says that **"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...old things have passed away...behold, all things have become new."** If we take this at all seriously then why do we continue to condemn ourselves after receiving the grace and forgiveness of God? I mean, don't we pray frequently for God to forgive us our debts (or sins, or trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (or those who've sinned or trespassed against us)? We're going to pray this in just a few minutes.   We're serious when we pray this aren't we? We really mean it, right? So, couldn't we look for ways to replace our resentment with compassion for ourselves and those who hurt us? Couldn't we try to understand ourselves and them just a little? Maybe even find some empathy?

As I said earlier, it's hard. Reacting is infinitely easier than responding. When we feel attacked, it's instinctual to become defensive. But it's **not** a great long-term strategy for coping with hurt. We need to look at the bigger picture because when we do forgiveness can be found, empathy can exist.   Proverbs has much to say on this subject. It reminds us that **"love prospers when a fault is forgiven...but dwelling on it separates close friends..."** that "**a kind word turns away wrath...but a harsh word stirs up anger."** When we apply these truths we're less likely to respond to painful words or actions in a careless and hurtful way. So, the next time that somebody hurts you, don't automatically assume it's because of the kind of person they are or even that you are. Look at the situation from a different point of view. See that perhaps that the person hurting you is only doing so because they've been hurt before.

God's purpose for us is that we would all be conformed to the image of Christ. This doesn't just happen. I believe that the church, all churches, need to pay closer attention the people's emotional health not just their spiritual health. Empathy... Forgiveness...these things are never easy to find. But, that doesn't mean they're impossible. The good news, as Paul reminded the church in Corinth, is that we can all be healed and set free from all past hurts so that we can comfort others with the same comfort we ourselves have received from God. When we embrace this, then truly our **mess** can become our **message**!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.