



A Place To Belong
Week 3 of 8 ~ A Place To Find Forgiveness

All through November and December we're talking about how Waikoloa Community Church is **A Place To Belong**. We've talked about how vital this need to belong somewhere is for all of us as human beings. We have a need to belong to something greater than ourselves, to be part of something special and important. We've said that the three essentials of human life are food, shelter and love and in week one we talked about how this is **A Place to Find Love**. We said that contrary to what you might have been shown in your life, contrary to what your negative self-talk might lead you to believe, you are actually a lovable person. You are lovable and God loves you with an everlasting love. I love you and if you plug in here, if you choose to belong here, you will find many other people who love you as well. This really is A Place to Find Love. YAY GOD!

Now, we've also said, none of us are perfect and there is no such thing as a Perfect Church. If you find it, don't join it because you will ruin it. Sometimes people here will hurt you, let you down, offend you. Because we are all broken people. That's not a problem with the church. That's a problem with human beings and human beings are everywhere. Don't miss out on the great positive things that come from belonging to a church by trying to avoid the human beings in the church. I guarantee you that you will find human beings in other places around the village too. The whole planet is infested with us. Really!

Fortunately, God has provided a solution for this problem of human beings hurting each other and letting each other down. We're going to talk about that in just a few minutes. Then, last week we talked about how this is **A Place to find Acceptance**. The Bible tells us not to harshly judge each other but instead to accept each other just as Jesus accepted us.

We said we realize none of us are perfect, so we should just accept each other as we are, even when we adamantly disagree with each other on politics, philosophy, lifestyle choices, etc. We said also that accepting each other is not enabling each other. Instead, it includes caring about each other too much to leave the other person where you find them. It's okay to say "I love you but I disagree with something you believe. I disagree with something you are doing. I want to try to convince you that what I believe is a better way for you."

Even if I can't convince you, I will still love you and accept you and be your friend. We said accepting is about drawing someone toward you rather than shoving them the direction you want them to go. Jesus always invited His friends with the words "Come, follow me" rather than "Stop doing that! Do that instead!" No. "Come, follow me." He drew us towards Himself and showed us a better way. That's what He wants us to do for each other as well. AMEN?

So, that brings us to today's message, Part Three of this series. Today we're going to talk about how Waikoloa Community Church is **A Place To Find Forgiveness**. If you are ready to hear what God has put on my heart to share with you today, let me hear you say, Hit Me Wit' It G! I'm ready!

I'm just curious, how many of you have read at least one of my daily devotional Blog entries on our **new church Website**? If you don't know, every day I take a different Hawaiian word as my devotional topic, I add in a Scripture that speaks to that topic and then I share what God puts on my heart to say. They are usually just 300-600 words long. They each take less than five minutes to read.

I've heard from several people who are getting a lot out of these so I'm going to keep writing them. When I get a whole year's worth I am going to self publish a 365 Day Hawaiian Word Devotional. You can also watch videos of every week's message on the website. You can download transcripts of the messages, check both the church events and village activities that meet in our facilities, sign up for Aloha Groups and much more all at WaikoloaCC.org. Next month we are launching a new app for your smart phones and tablets that will have all that on it as well plus a church directory and a Bible App built right in. Pretty cool stuff!

So, anyway, in my daily blog last Sunday, I wrote about the 'Olelo Hawai'i words **Kala and Kalana**. **Kalana means "to ASK forgiveness."** and the root of this word, **Kala, means "to OFFER forgiveness."** We're going to talk about both of these today.

The Hawaiian word *Kala*, to offer forgiveness, can also mean to untie, to release, to unburden or to free. Kalana, to ask for forgiveness, is to ask to be set free from judgement, set free from a painful prison, to have a heavy burden removed. This is also true of one of the Greek words for forgiveness as well. It shows up in our Scripture today. The Greek word *aphiemi* can be translated in the same way as the release or the freeing or the unburdening of someone. When Jesus announced His ministry and said that He had come to “set the captives free” He used this Greek word *aphiemi*. Literally *aphiemi* means to send away from one's self, to forsake, to hurl away, to disregard.

Remember, last week we were talking about how **acceptance is drawing a person toward you**? This week I want you to really hear what forgiveness is. **Forgiveness is the shoving away, actually the hurling away, of the offense that has damaged your relationship.** Forgiving someone is taking the thing that is standing between a right relationship between the two of you and hurling it away, removing the barrier to reconciling your friendship.

Note that this is not usually what we do. When someone hurts us, instead of shoving the offense away to remove it and forget it, to forgive it. We instead often choose to shove the PERSON away from us. We avoid them or we break off the relationship all together or worse, we seek revenge on them, often letting those feelings of revenge consume us, burdening us in a painful prison of the mind. That is a terribly unhealthy position for both people to be in. If we are the offender, we need to seek out and ask for forgiveness. If we are the one who was offended, we need to be willing to freely offer it and set that other person free. That's what Jesus did for us and if we are truly His followers, that's what we will do for each other as well. Look at what the Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians 3:12-13

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ~ Colossians 3:12-13

He says something similar in Ephesians 4:31-32

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. ~ Ephesians 4:31-32

When the local church is working right, this is **A Place to Find Forgiveness** like that. When you truly experience the full forgiveness that only Christ can offer, when you realize just how much He has done for you, it becomes much easier to forgive others who have let you down in life.

I want you to know, Waikoloa Community Church is BOTH a place to ASK forgiveness and be assured of receiving it, and it is a place to OFFER forgiveness in the same way that you have received it.

When the local church is working right, everyone can find forgiveness, everyone can be healed and everyone can be set free in the process. Now, of course, when the local church is not working right all kinds of bad things happen. One of the great tragedies is the bad image the church has been given by some church people, including some church priests and some church pastors over the years. I talk to people all the time who are convinced that church is not a place for them because they feel such terrible shame and guilt and grief for something they have done that they know they should not have done. They have been made to believe that they are not good enough to come to church, that they are somehow unforgivable.

They let someone down. They broke someone's heart. They betrayed a friend. They sinned in some way that deeply hurt someone else or in some way that they know disappointed God. Somewhere along the way they have met a church person who just judged them, pointed their finger at them like ol' **Gomer Pyle and said "Shame, shame, shame." A few of you might be too young to remember Gomer, but most of us are old geezers like me..**

That fear of being shamed, that fear of not being forgiven, of asking for forgiveness but being rejected instead, that is a big part of what keeps people away from the life-changing power of being part of a local church. I alluded to this in week one. People say to me, "Pastor, if you really knew who I was and everything I've done, you wouldn't want me in your church."

I've had so many people tell me, "God could never love someone like me. Not after what I've done." Not always, but more often than not, that misperception of reality has come from a church person or pastor or priest who has made them feel like whatever their sin was, it is the unpardonable sin. Sure, Jesus forgives MOST people, but He would never be willing to forgive me. So they don't want anything to do with church! Who can blame them!?!

If you have ever been made to feel that kind of shame, ever been made to feel that you are somehow not worthy of God's love or forgiveness, if you have ever been made to feel that something you did was too bad to ever be forgiven, on behalf of all church people and pastors and priests everywhere, I just want to tell you I am so sorry. I am so sorry that happened to you and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive whoever it was that made you feel that way. I hope you can believe me today when I tell you that this church, this pastor, this place is different. This is **a Place where you will find forgiveness.**

Whatever you have done, you don't have to live in shame. To walk around carrying that kind of burden of feeling like you cannot be forgiven is truly an unfair prison that you need to be set free from and when the local church is working right, this is a place to find that kind of forgiveness. Jesus can set you free from that. When you sit down and have a talk with God, when you open up your heart and pour out all your regrets, and all your shame and all your guilt and just ask Him to forgive you, ask Him for another chance, you don't have to worry about what his response will be.

There is absolutely no risk that God will say no. His positive answer to absolutely forgive you, to set you free, is promised by Him, no matter what! Look at what the Apostle John tells us in 1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ~ 1 John 1:9

Now, maybe you hear that and you think, "Yeah Greg, that's easy for you to say. You don't know what I've done. If you knew what I have done you wouldn't make such a promise to me. There's no way I can ever be forgiven for what I've done." If someone has ever made you feel like you weren't good enough to come to church, you have been lied to. Think about some of the greatest heroes of the Bible.

Adam and Eve, the first human beings, disobeyed God and started this whole sin ball rolling. Noah, the last righteous man on earth at the time, was a drunk who slept in the nude. Abraham, the forefather of faith, let other men walk off with his wife on two different occasions because he was afraid of them hurting him.

Sarah, let her husband give her to other men and then let him sleep with another woman and then ending up hated her for it and treating her terribly. Jacob, was pretty much a pathological deceiver. Moses, the humblest man on the face of the earth, great leader of the Hebrew people, also once murdered a man, covered it up and ran away.

Moses' brother, Aaron, the first high priest, who watched God triumph over Pharaoh, just a short time later formed an idol called the Golden Calf after caving into peer pressure. Moses' sister, Miriam, the songwriter, had sibling jealousy and a greed for power.

King David, the friend of God, the one referred to as "a man after God's own heart" committed adultery and then concealed his adultery with the murder of her rightful husband. Solomon, the wisest man in the world, was also arguably the world's greatest sex addict with 1,000 different sexual partners. All the prophets, even as they spoke for God, struggled with impurity, depression, unfaithful spouses and broken families.

The Apostle Peter denied knowing Jesus three times just hours after promising Jesus he would die with Him rather than ever deny Him. All the disciples abandoned Jesus when He was arrested after promising Him they would never leave Him. The Apostle Paul persecuted, imprisoned and oversaw the execution of many Christians before he himself was converted. Paul would later write these words in 1 Timothy 1:15-16

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. ~ 1 Timothy 1:15-16

Another way of translating Paul's words are that he called himself "the chief of sinners." Yes, it is true, I don't know what you've done but you know what? I don't care what you've done. I am confident that I have probably done worse stuff, at least in my heart I have. Whatever you have done or whatever you should have done but didn't do, it doesn't matter. God CAN forgive you and God WANTS to forgive you. God wants to hurl all that stuff away.

Now, it's true you don't have to belong to a church to experience that forgiveness from God. Standing in a church doesn't make you a Christian anymore than standing in a McDonalds makes you a hamburger. You don't have to belong to a church to experience true forgiveness, but I'll tell you, of all the places I have been in my life, there is no place better. I'll say it again. When the local church is working right, everyone can find forgiveness, everyone can be healed and everyone can be set free in the process. When the local church is working right, it truly is the hope of the world. So, what actually happens when God forgives us? Look at Psalm 103:12

*As far as the east is from the west,
so far has He removed our transgressions from us. ~ Psalm 103:12*

Think about this statement. God hurls away our transgressions. As far as the east is from the west. Now, that's not like a globe, where eventually the thing you have thrown away comes circling back around and hits you in the head. This is like a straight line, an infinite distance apart, the opposite direction. God has taken our sins and thrown them that far away. He doesn't hurl away His relationship with us. He doesn't block us out. Instead He draws us to Him and then removes the problem between us. Look at what God tells us through the prophet Micah in Micah 7:19

*He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot.
Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. ~ Micah 7:19*

This is often referred to as “the sea of forgetfulness.” When God forgives us He takes our sins and drops them into the sea of forgetfulness and remembers them no more. Why is that? Because God is pretty old? He’s got a bad memory? No. It’s because He **CHOOSES** to forgive and forget.

After God forgives you, you can come back to Him one minute later and say “Hey God, do you remember that awful thing I did the other day?” and He will say, “Nope. I don’t remember that at all. As far as I’m concerned it never happened. It is forgotten.” He unburdens us. He releases us. He sets us free from the prison of unforgiveness we often trap ourselves in. When God forgives, He also forgets. He hurls the offense so far away, He hurls it out of existence.

So, let’s just make this really real. Have you ever hurt someone else? Have you ever hurt yourself? Have you ever been angry at God, said some things to Him or about Him you shouldn’t have said? Have you ever let anyone down? Have you ever lied? Cheated someone or cheated on someone? Stolen from someone? Injured someone? Have you ever betrayed someone? Murdered someone? Sexually harassed someone? Have you ever spoken harshly to someone? Have you ever been a discourager instead of an encourager? Well, join the club! We all have! Maybe you didn’t literally, physically do some of those things but you have done them in your heart. Jesus says if you hate a brother you are guilty of murder. Jesus says if you look at someone lustfully you have committed adultery with them in your heart. We are all guilty. The Bible says in Romans 3:23

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ~ Romans 3:23

All of us need to be forgiven. That’s okay. There is some comfort, for me, in knowing we are all in the same boat. God offers forgiveness to us. He offers to set us free from the prison of unforgiveness, whether we are the offender or the offended. Again, when the local church is working right, there is no better place on earth to find forgiveness. This is a place to start over as a new person. Look at what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come ~ 2 Corinthians 5:17

And look at this promise from Jesus Himself to us.

So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ~ John 8:36

I want so much for each of you to know that feeling today, to truly believe it and feel that release. I want you to feel that weight, that burden lifted off of your shoulders today. I want you to really receive forgiveness. I want you to be able to walk out of here today, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are completely free.

You are totally forgiven by God, and He will NEVER again remember your sins. He has hurled them far, far away. You are a new creation. You get a do over and you are really free! That's hard for us to grasp because that's not typically the way we do it as human beings is it? I often hear people say "Okay, I will forgive them, but I will NEVER forget." If that is your perspective, then, I have to tell you, you haven't REALLY forgiven them. Because **forgiveness INCLUDES forgetting**. I also hear people, after they feel guilt over something terrible they have done, "I can never forgive myself!" If God has forgiven you, and you say you have received that forgiveness, but you still keep running through all those sins of yours in your mind, shaming yourself over and over again for past mistakes, then you have not forgiven yourself. Because **forgiveness INCLUDES forgetting**.

Scripture tells us to forgive others in the same way we have been forgiven by Jesus and that includes forgiving ourselves! If Jesus forgives you but you don't forgive yourself, you realize you are saying you have a higher standard than God right? That's kind of crazy. When Jesus forgave us, He also forgot the offense and that's what we need to do to with ourselves and with others as well.

But, let's be honest, we kind of struggle with that part don't we? It is hard to forgive someone who hurts you. Whenever I find myself struggling with that I remember a story **Corrie Ten Boom** told. Corrie was a prisoner in a Nazi Concentration Camp. Her father and sister died there and though Corrie experienced all kinds of atrocities she survived. In 1947 she went to defeated Germany to deliver messages in various places about God's forgiveness. After her talk a man came forward to speak to her and she recognized him as one of the guards from the camp. She says:

"It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin." He approached her and stuck his hand out to shake her hand. He said: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" She froze. He continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there." He didn't remember her but she remembered him. He went on: "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, fraulein, will you forgive me?"

Corrie says "I stood there—I whose sins had again and again been forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that.

The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then.

But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit. I've never been injured by a nazi but I know Corrie's struggle to truly forgive others as I have been forgiven. Maybe you do too. But if we really want our church to be a local church that's working right, if we really want our local church to be a place where anyone and everyone can find forgiveness, true forgiveness, forgetting forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that hurls the offense as far as the east is from the west, the kind of forgiveness that drops the offense into the sea of forgetfulness and remembers it no more, the kind of forgiveness, that sets the captives free and unburdens peoples hearts and souls, we are all going to have to forgive AND forget the wrongs done to us, just as Jesus has done for each of us. So here is my challenge for each of us today as we close.

I want you to think of a situation in your life right now that still needs forgiveness, true, forgetting level forgiveness, to occur. Maybe there is a relationship in your life where you have hurt someone or let someone down. Maybe you have betrayed someone's trust. Maybe you've spoken a harsh word to someone or been abusive in some way. Maybe you've lied to someone or lied about someone. Maybe you have stolen from someone or at least have not paid someone back what you owed them. Or maybe you are the victim and one or more of these things has been done to you by someone else.

Either way, I know how painful that feels. It is like a heavy burden, like a prison, like your feelings are all tied up in knots. You would love to find release but it hasn't come. There is a wall between you and the other person. Maybe they are pushing you further away or maybe you are pushing them away. Or maybe you are in a mutually dysfunctional relationship where you are both doing those kinds of things to each other on a regular basis. Each of you consistently hurting the other person and then holding on to all the pain and resentment that arose.

In all of these cases, you are both trapped, both weighed down by the sin in the situation. You are both being slowly poisoned by the lack of forgiveness in the relationship and regardless of whether you were the original offender or the one who was offended, you have both lost because your relationship has been lost. There is a giant wall between you now, preventing you from being in Christian community with each other. Today, let all of that go and truly embrace forgiveness in your life. Receive God's forgiveness and forgive yourself. Even if the person who hurt you has not asked for forgiveness, offer it to them anyway. Unburden them through sacrificial love and forgiveness. I know it's hard. If you can't bring yourself to do it, just like Corrie Ten Boom did, ask God to do it through you.

~~~~~ LET'S PRAY ~~~~~