

FORGIVE BUT DON'T FORGET

Then Peter came and said to him, "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, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Matthew 18:21-35 NRSV

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:12-17 NRSV

C.S. Lewis has a book called *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* and there's a passage in this book of real letters that Lewis wrote to his friend Malcolm where he describes something that for him was miraculous.¹ During his daily prayer one morning, he found himself suddenly able to forgive a man who had treated him badly thirty years earlier. Whenever Lewis had thought about this man throughout his life, he had done so with bitterness and resentment, but for whatever reason that morning during prayer, Lewis was able to find the grace to forgive him. God granted him the grace to forgive that man and he noted it as remarkable.

Now why would it be remarkable to forgive a 30 year old grudge? Well, because after carrying that grudge around for 30 years, I imagine that Lewis had gotten quite used to it. Letting go of

something so familiar is a tremendous change. I don't know about you--you certainly may be in a healthier place in life than I am--but I have a certain amount of baggage I carry with me. I carry the baggage of old long-nursed grudges and I've got one I want to share with you today. I must admit that I'm not proud to share it, because it's sort of silly, not to mention embarrassing.

I was not, despite my size now, a very big kid. I was very small, and so I had plenty experience growing up being the victim of bullies. My grudge is towards a particular bully from 8th grade. I didn't even know the guy; he and I were in a class together and he started picking on me. His friends all joined in the ridicule--names, jokes, making fun of me and so on. Wherever I went this guy just seemed to there, by my locker, in class, after school, and he always picked on me. I didn't do anything about it.

Now there were other bullies, but they were bigger, and I know why I didn't stand up to them. They would have crushed me like a bug. It would have been awful and I wouldn't be here today. I think I could've taken this particular one, however. He wasn't so big and I think that's why my grudge sticks with me when I occasionally think about him. It is often the case, I think, that when it is hardest to forgive someone it's because our feelings are as much about ourselves as they are about the person who hurt us. I had many bullies, but it's hardest to forgive the one that I wish I had punched out!

I guess I need to work on this grudge, but you see I come from a genetic stock that is really good at nursing grudges. I have learned that my grandfather on my father's side nursed grudges all his life. As a child, I didn't know it; I was a kid after all. To me he was a loving, if a little distant grandfather. I have learned, however, from my father and his siblings who knew him and lived with him, that my grandfather was a man who could, even though he was in his 80's, look back and list for you everyone in his life who had ever wronged him in any way. I imagine that must have been a very heavy load for my grandfather to carry, so heavy in fact that my grandfather committed suicide when I was in 7th grade. There are many reasons why I think he did it. I think he was depressed, probably most of his life, and he was of the generation where you did not talk about your feelings. I think also it was because that load of bitterness he was carrying around finally got too heavy. I think about my grandfather sometimes when I'm carrying my bitterness around with me, bitterness for things small and for things big. Sometimes, they're something insignificant like an 8th grade bully or something much bigger, things I wouldn't want to share about from the pulpit. I think about my grandfather and his heavy baggage and how that weight eventually catches up with all of us.

I titled my sermon this morning, *Forgive, but Don't Forget*, because I think that old cliché about "forgive and forget" has done perhaps as much damage as really any way of thinking. The idea that says forgiveness is forgetting implies that to forgive someone when they have hurt you must mean that you are fully over it. You are so over it that you can put it out of your mind. If you still think about it, then that must mean that you have really not forgiven that person. So for Christians who are taught forgiveness means forgetting--for Christians who pray "God forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" each week in worship—we may end up troubled by just how many past hurts remain in our minds.

I don't believe forgiveness means forgetting, I believe forgiveness actually means the opposite. Forgiveness doesn't mean shoving something under the rug, or putting it out of your mind. Forgiveness actually means bringing to conscious awareness an experience where another person has hurt you and then deciding that you will forgive that person anyway.

In fact, I believe forgiveness is not a once-and-for-all decision, but rather forgiveness is a process that takes time. Sometimes hurts are so great that forgiveness does not come in a flash or by an act of will, but rather through a process that we have to work on, perhaps our entire life. There are some hurts so great that we must recommit ourselves each day to the act of forgiving. Each day the pain stays with us, and so we must choose each day again to forgive.

God may be able, as the Psalm we read this morning says, to take our sins and put them as far away from God as the east is from the west, but that's God. We don't seem to have the power to really shove things like this away from us. Instead they come again and again and again and we are haunted by the pains that others have inflicted upon us.

So I believe forgiveness is a choice we make, or rather a better way to say it is, forgiveness is something we discover. True forgiveness is something that God enables us to do, I don't really believe it's something we can do out of our own strength. God helps us to discover forgiveness.

The verses in Matthew chapter 18 read this morning have to do with reconciliation, something the church does not spend enough time dealing with. When Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness he said, "If someone in the *church* sins against me." It's an anachronism, of course; there was no church when Jesus and his Disciples were walking around. What we have in this passage is Matthew inserting his own situation—conflict in the early church—into his story about Jesus. Although this saying about forgiveness easily could have come directly from Jesus, Matthew has put into the mouth of his gospel's characters a lesson for his community of faith—and for ours. Peter asks, "How many times should I forgive this one who hurts me, seven times?" That's pretty good; there are some people I don't even want to forgive once, much less seven times. Seven is pretty generous, but not enough for Jesus. He replies that the believer is to forgive seventy seven times or as other translations say seventy times seven times. Either way the point is if you're keeping count you're probably not really forgiving.

The point of Jesus' instructions in this chapter of Matthew is not to avoid the pain that someone has caused or to ignore what they've done to you. Instead, the point is to face the offense--what they have done to you—and stare it down and say, if possible, to the offender—the person who carried out the hurtful act—"What you did to me was wrong. It was wrong, and it hurt, but I'm not going to let what you did rule my life!"

The Rabbi Harold Kushner notes that forgiveness does not mean excusing what has been done. He says, "Forgiveness is a favor you do yourself, not a favor you do the other person. Forgiveness is something you can do when you are strong enough to let go. When you are strong enough to say, 'You, because of what you did to me, don't deserve the power to be the ghost inside my head.'"² Kushner's perspective is a gift to those of us who mistakenly assume forgiveness means forgetting pain done to us.

Forgiveness is all about you saying to the one who hurt you, “Because of what you’ve done, I’m not going to give you power over me. I’m not going to let what you have done to me determine what kind of person I will be. I’m not going to let you and what you’ve done to me determine what kind of life I will live. I’m not going to let your hurtful act estrange me from God and alienate me from others I love. I’m not going to let what you did to me divide my heart and soul, so that I spend my days conflicted over what you’ve done.” Forgiveness is not letting someone walk all over you; forgiveness is in fact standing up and saying, “You no longer have power over me.”

Forgiveness should not be mistaken as weakness. In fact it takes much more strength to forgive than to do otherwise. It’s why Mahatma Gandhi said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” By its very nature, forgiveness involves the difficult task of loving people we do not like. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He didn’t say when you love someone they will instantly and magically be transformed into your best friend. No, they remain enemies, and sometimes we must love people even though they are our enemies.

The whole history of the church is unfortunately littered with horrible stories of religious leaders equating forgiveness with pointless suffering. Such perspectives demand that wives being beaten by their husbands should go back for another beating and forgive their abuser “like Christ forgives you,” or that children should forgive abusive parents and keep going back for another sock in the head. This is not forgiveness, its idiocy. Yes, Christ forgave his abusers and suffered greatly, but he did so for a greater purpose. There is no greater purpose in being beaten every time you walk in your own front door. Forgiveness does not involve being a victim. Forgiveness is saying to the victimizer, “You will not have power over me. I will love you, even if I have to love you as an enemy. Even so, I will not hate you. I will not nurse my desire for revenge. I will not let that bitterness take root inside of me and eat me from the inside out.”

We remain trapped and haunted by those who have hurt us, but this parable of Jesus (often called the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant) reminds us that the street of forgiveness runs two ways. Not only are we the ones who have been wronged, but we also hurt others. We are not just people who have been offended; we are also ones who offend. We find in this passage a king and a slave--a slave in debt up to his eyeballs, who owes a ridiculously high amount, Jesus is using hyperbole to make his point. It’s as if the entire U.S. national debt has been incurred by this one slave. The amount of money he is said to have owed was more than an entire nation paid in taxes to Rome on an annual basis.³ In spite of this great amount, the king to whom the debt is owed ends up forgiving it and the servant. Ironically and reprehensibly, the forgiven servant ends up refusing to forgive another who owes him a relatively small amount of money. Mercy is always desirable when we are the recipient of it; less so, when we have to give it to someone else.

The parable is disturbing, not just because of the servant’s lack of mercy, but also because of what the king does at the end. He says, “You couldn’t forgive, even though I forgave you, therefore, I’m going to have you tortured.” Furthermore, it’s also a troubling parable, because Matthew has appended an interpretation at the end of the original parable that says, “God will show you the same lack of mercy that you show to your brother or sister.”⁴ It’s very troubling to

think that God's forgiveness will be dependent upon whether or not we can forgive others. We pray every week, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who've sinned against us," one way of interpreting those words is to say, "God forgive us to the same extent as we are able to forgive others."

I don't believe that's how God's grace works; otherwise it would not be grace. I believe that God forgives us even when we go to our grave clutching bitterness and rage against those who have hurt us. I believe God forgave my grandfather when he ended his life. Nonetheless, it is at least worth pondering the words we pray each Sunday as we gather around the communion table. We are forgiven people, and therefore the forgiveness and grace we receive should at least inspire in us a way of life where we let go of the bitterness, rage and anger that rattles around inside of us. We ought to at least *want* to let it go.

This week on the anniversary of 9-11, I felt like I always feel--I despaired for humanity. I despair about the cycles of violence we find ourselves in. As nations and as individuals, we seek revenge upon one another, and I end up thinking that we humans are never going to break out of this cycle of blame and inflicting upon others what has been inflicted upon us or worse. It's on September 11, that I perhaps most fully believe we need a savior; we need God's grace to empower us to forgive. We must have the grace of God if we are ever to forgive the unforgivable.

You may have seen the movie, *Dead Man Walking*. In the book by the same title, Sister Helen Prejean, tells the story about a father, whose son was murdered by one of the people she worked with on death row. The father relates that when he came out to identify the body of his son, he knelt down and began praying The Lord's Prayer. When he began praying "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive . . .", he stopped and realized what the words meant and the commitment he was making with that prayer. From that day on, he still had moments of rage, bitterness and desire for revenge, but he nonetheless kept trying to pray that prayer.⁵

I hear a story like that and I think, "Man, I can't even forgive my 8th grade bully. If somebody does something to one of my kids there is no way I'm forgiving them." Yet, within this room there are people who have had children die in terrible ways. Within this room there are people who have been beaten by their spouses and/or parents, but who have found ways to at least try and forgive. I stand in awe of these people. These are people right here in our church who have shared their stories with me. That's grace. That's a Savior. That's God. Because I don't know how any human has the power to forgive such things.

If my 8th grade bully were his this morning, would I forgive him or would I sock him in the nose? I don't know.

"God, forgive me my sins as I forgive those who sin against me."

Amen

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¹ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964), 106.

² I don't know if this quotation from Harold Kushner comes from an interview with him or one of his writings. I took it from an e-mail newsletter I receive from the ecumenical media group Faithstreams (www.faithstreams.com). It is supported by a number of faith groups, including our own denomination, The Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. You can view the full quotation on-line at:
<http://newmorning.faithstreams.com/DaybookArchives/tabid/267/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/250/Letting-Go.aspx>.

³ Martinus C. deBoer, "Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1988), 214-232.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I have not read Prejean's book. This account from her book is related by Susan Pendleton Jones in her article "Forgiven and Forgiving," *Christian Century* (Aug. 25-Sept. 1, 1999), 801. You can read the full article on-line at: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=593>.