

Lenten Sermon Series 2008

*Forgiveness 1: A Mandate to Forgive*

Leviticus 19:17-18; Matthew 5:21-26; 6:9-15

10 February 2008

Years ago when I was in school, I got entangled with a person who had a lot of mental problems. I don't want to go into all the details or we would be here for hours, but let it be enough to say she would act sweet and friendly to my face, but she would bad-mouth me and accuse me of all kinds of horrible things to other people behind my back. I never quite figured out why I became such a target for her, except that I was friends with someone she wanted to be friends with. This woman had had a really hard life, had been abused and exploited by the people who should have loved and protected her, so I understood that it messed up her concept of relationships, but that understanding didn't keep me from being really hurt by the things she did to me. Worst of all was how she would manipulate the rituals of the church. She would come to me and beg me to forgive her. During the passing of the peace in church, she would approach me with her hand outstretched, as if to make peace with me before the altar. She would pray aloud in church, making thinly veiled references to me as someone who wouldn't forgive her. It was horrible to be used in that way. It got to where I didn't even want to shake her hand in church, and yet I felt horribly guilty about snubbing her in that way. Doesn't the Bible teach us that we must forgive? Don't we say every week in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"? I could not forgive this woman, because whenever I did, she would turn right around and do the same things all over again. But if I couldn't forgive her, could I even claim to be Christian?

In desperation, I went to the library to read up about forgiveness, but all the books said was that we are commanded to forgive. They didn't explain how to do this. They didn't tell you how you could experience forgiveness with a person who will just keep hurting you. In the end, in order to protect myself, I just had to sever ties with her. Now I think I can honestly say that I have forgiven her – but that's easy to say as I've not seen her in years! The situation still troubles me. I'm sure every one of you has at least one story like that to tell: of being deeply wounded by someone, and wanting to forgive them but not wanting to get hurt again – or perhaps even not wanting to forgive them at all! Forgiveness is essential to Christianity, but sometimes the concept seems like an unrealistic platitude. If we are commanded to forgive, how can we experience that in any meaningful way in our lives?

For Lent this year I chose "forgiveness" as my theme for my sermon series, and fortunately times have greatly changed. This time when I went to the library, I found more books than I could read on the subject. The majority of them have been written since September 11, 2001, so maybe the subject reflects our society grappling with what forgiveness means in the face of an unforgivable crime. But another thing that is different from the books I read before is that religion and science seem to be having a deep conversation about the subject. Therapists and psychologists have done studies on the phenomenon of forgiveness, and religion now has a scientific basis for discussing the subject. When I first came up with this idea, I wondered if I would have enough material to preach on for an entire Lenten season, but I found that there is far more to cover than is possible in a mere six weeks! So consider this series not to be a completely comprehensive study of forgiveness, but rather as the opening of a conversation that we all need to continue to have. Because what scientists have found is what religion knew all along but could not always articulate: that forgiveness is essential to our own healing and wholeness. But forgiveness is not always what we think it is.

Today I'm going to look at the concept of forgiveness as it is presented to us in the Bible. Next week I will get into some of the specifics as offered by therapists and psychologists as well as theologians on what exactly forgiveness is and what it

is not. The third Sunday I will talk about the steps of forgiveness, particular when it comes to forgiving people who have wronged us. On the fourth Sunday, I will look at larger, more complicated issues of how to forgive societies or groups of people for wrongs against humanity, and even what it means to forgive God. On the fifth Sunday we will have a chance to dialogue with a member of our church who has had to grapple with these issues in a tough way in their own lives. And then of course we will enter into Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter, telling perhaps the ultimate story of forgiveness as God reaches out to us in Jesus Christ.

To start us off, then, let us talk about what the Bible says about forgiveness. We might think the answer is obvious. As it's summed up in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." But as I studied the question, it turned out to be much more complicated than that. There are many voices in the Bible, speaking over a period of centuries, and together they tell a complex story. First of all, I was surprised to learn that the Old Testament really doesn't address the issue of interpersonal forgiveness, at least not as explicitly as in the New Testament. Instead, the focus in the Old Testament is on curbing violence and vengeance, as we hear in this commandment from the book of Leviticus: "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Some of that sounds a bit like Jesus' teaching, except notice that these commands are for dealing with your own tribe: your kin, your neighbor, your people. Nothing is said about other tribes or foreigners. I guess you're allowed to hate them as much as you want!

But it turns out this is a good place to start. We all know how easy it is for fights and problems to arise among the people around us. The Bible here is teaching us how to live in peace with those folks we deal with every day. Do not hate them. Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge. If you have a problem with someone, reprove them openly rather than nursing hatred, or else you will incur guilt on yourself. In ancient times, before the rise of governments and laws, people took matters into their own hands. If my neighbor steals my cow, I not only steal it back, but maybe I burn down his barn in order to teach him a lesson. Then in revenge, he comes and burns down my house. So I rustle up my relatives and go after him, and the whole thing just escalates. People needed to curb this desire for vengeance, but the only way to do so was to honor a code of fairness and justice. So we get the old commandment about "an eye for an eye, a life for a life." Martin Luther King would later point out how this rule leaves everybody blind, but at least an eye for an eye keeps me from seeking vengeance that outdoes the original crime. So the first commandment was not so much about forgiving as it was about not seeking revenge.

Interestingly, the concept of actual forgiveness comes first in the form of canceling economic debt. This is found in Leviticus 25 and is called the concept of "jubilee." Just as we all rest every seventh day on the Sabbath, a day when there is no slave or master for all rest equally, so every seven years was also a year of rest for the crops, when no one would sow or harvest. And after "seven weeks of years," or seven times seven years, forty-nine years, there was a jubilee year. All debts were cancelled. All land that had been sold was returned to its original owners. All slaves were set free. Everything that had changed hands in those forty-nine years, all the imbalance and debt that had occurred – all was now forgiven, wiped out, restored to its original state. That may be an alien concept of forgiveness for us, but it is still preserved in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which is most accurately translated as "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

One of the interesting things I learned in my study is that Judaism as a whole puts a much greater emphasis on justice rather than forgiveness. It's not that forgiveness is unknown in Judaism, but that they are equally concerned with fairness: that wrongs, for example, should be justly punished, and people shouldn't just get off the hook for the things they've

done. So Judaism puts certain limits on forgiveness. For example, only the person who has been wronged can offer forgiveness. You cannot, in other words, forgive someone on another person's behalf.

This changes, however, in Christianity. We too are concerned with justice and fairness, but our whole religion is founded on the idea that we are all sinners, that we have all done wrong to the extent that we are morally complicit in the murder of God's own son, and yet God has managed to forgive us that crime even though we are undeserving. Therefore, since we have been so forgiven, we are morally obligated to forgive others. Indeed, no sin is beyond forgiveness, so now mercy trumps justice. Indeed, even repentance is not a requirement in order to be forgiven. As Paul says, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Repentance in Christianity often comes *after* forgiveness. This need to forgive as we have been forgiven gave rise to the practice of confession, so now it is possible to be forgiven by someone other than the person you have wronged.

The New Testament is full of examples. We heard the command from the Sermon on the Mount about how you must reconcile with your brother or sister before you offer your gift at the altar. Our practice of passing of the peace arises from that verse. We symbolically reconcile with one another when we come to church. But as I said at the beginning of the sermon, it is indeed only a shallow act and cannot substitute for true forgiveness. In fact, in the absence of forgiveness, even this beautiful ritual can cause deep spiritual harm.

And that is the irony with Christianity. We are commanded to forgive, but we aren't really given the tools or the knowledge to know how to do it. Supposedly our need to forgive others is based on God's forgiveness of us, but the two can't really compare. First of all, no one can truly hurt God. Even when we killed Jesus, he popped up again three days later! But people can indeed be deeply hurt. We are not able to rise again from our wounds so easily. Secondly, God knows and sees all. God can look into a person's inmost heart and see the true state of their soul. But we humans are not omniscient. When I forgave my friend, her soul was not automatically redeemed. And while traditionally Christianity has maintained that all sins are equal because they all separate us from God, here on earth we know that there is a huge difference between me gossiping behind someone's back, or me stealing someone's life savings, or me murdering someone. Sins do carry different weights. Some are more easily forgiven and healed than others. It's easy to say we should all be able to forgive, but try telling that to someone whose child was kidnapped and brutally murdered. Or for that matter, try telling that to a nation when four planes were crashed into buildings, killing thousands.

The conclusion for me is that forgiveness in the Bible is a work in progress. Back in the dim reaches of time, our ancestors were not ready to hear Jesus' message of turning the other cheek. We had to start – and still have to start – by curbing our desire for revenge, by learning not to hold a grudge. We move from there to working out our differences with our neighbors before they can fester into wounds. We learn to make peace with one another. And eventually, when we have mastered these steps, then we are able to learn to forgive. How to do that will be the subject of our next sermon.