

Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 18, 1996. Scripture Lessons; Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the riots following the first Rodney King verdict several years ago, Reginald Denny, a truck driver in the wrong place at the wrong time, was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten by a raging gang. After his painful recovery, he met face to face with his attackers, shook hands with them, and forgave them. A reporter, commenting on the scene, wrote, "Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage." The implication, of course - only a brain damaged person would forgive those who nearly killed him. Forgiveness does, sometimes, seem like a crazy thing to do.

^{But} Forgiveness is why Christ came. ^{And} We've been commissioned to forgive, not only by the Lord's Prayer, but everywhere in the New Testament. On the cross, Jesus cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In a series of instructions in Matthew 18 Jesus instructs Christians to seek out erring members of the congregation who have wandered away. He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (or it can be translated 70 times 7)." And at the conclusion of the parable where the unforgiving servant is handed over to be tortured Jesus warns us, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister

from your heart." The major business of the Christian is forgiveness.

What does it mean to forgive? First, what does it not mean?

Forgiving is not excusing. We excuse people when they do something unintentionally to hurt us. A man who isn't looking where he's going bumps into me at Ames and says, "Oh, I'm sorry. Excuse me." And I excuse him. I don't forgive him. I don't need to forgive him. I excuse him. He didn't mean any harm.

Forgiving is not forgetting. I've been told that young children who've been sexually molested often forget the terrible crime that they've suffered. Their pain is so overwhelming that they push the horrible memory into the cellar or the attic of their lives. But it's still there. Years later it can surface in the form of clinical depression and serious illness. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting.

Forgiving is not tolerating sinful or disobedient behavior. Tolerance is a great virtue. But some things simply can't be tolerated. When I was at Knox Presbyterian Church in Kenmore, NY we suffered a series of church break ins. The culprit was a troubled 13 year old neighborhood boy. The police said, "You need to press charges." We said, "No. We'll simply forgive him." The boy broke in again and took a typewriter which he dropped and broke making his getaway. The police caught him and said, "You need to press charges." We said, "No. We're Christians. We'll simply forgive him." The next time he stole a small copier which he also dropped and broke trying to escape. The police caught him and said to us, "Look. You aren't doing

this kid any good. You're going to destroy him with your tolerance. Press charges." We said, "We want to forgive him but we're also going to press charges." The judge made him take responsibility for what he'd done. He got a job and earned money to help to pay for the damage he'd done. Forgiveness is not tolerance.

Forgiving is not ignoring. That's what we do a lot of times. We simply turn our heads and pretend that we just don't see and we think that's forgiveness. We bury our heads in the sand. Say your in business. You have an employee who consistently comes in late. You say, "I'll simply forgive him" meaning that you try to ignore his tardiness but inside you're seething with anger and resentment, and reinforcing irresponsible behavior. Forgiveness is not ignoring the sinful actions of another.

Furthermore, forgiving is not easy. C. S. Lewis wrote that nearly everybody thinks forgiveness is a great idea until we, personally, have someone to forgive. ~~Forgiving is not only, not easy~~

~~One more thing forgiving is not.~~ Forgiving is not natural. Last week I saw a bumper sticker on the back of a truck that, I'm sure, belonged to a young "gung-ho" Marine. The bumper sticker said, "To err is human and to forgive is divine, neither of which is Marine Corp policy." In other words, it's not the policy of the Marine corp to err or to forgive. There's at least partial truth in what that bumper sticker claimed. It's neither Marine Corp or human policy to forgive. Forgiveness doesn't come naturally to us human beings. We find sin against us easy to

excuse, to ignore, to tolerate, but it's not our policy to forgive. We don't find it ^{easy or} natural to forgive.

After the bombing in Oklahoma City a year and a half ago, the whole city gathered for a memorial service. Billy Graham spoke at the service. He began by saying, "We are here with you to let the healing begin. We are here to show you that a nation stands beside you in your grief. We are here to forgive."

My guess is that very few people were there that day to forgive. The attorney general was talking about retribution. The president was promising the death penalty. Billy Graham was speaking out for forgiveness - not tolerating what happened, not excusing it, not ignoring the carnage, but forgiving - forgiving because Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Forgiveness breaks the chain of cause and effect. When someone sins against another a chain of cause of effect begins. I hit my brother. My brother hits me back which means I have to hit him again harder. But forgiveness breaks the chain of cause and effect. Forgiveness says, "The buck stops here."

Most of those who hurt us are people we're closest to - parents, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, sons and daughters, friends. These are the people whom we have to forgive over and over again if we're to continue to live together as a family. Trying to get even only leads to a vicious circle of retaliation. Someone once said, "Sometimes the only difference between a happy home and a miserable one is the refusal of one or more members of

the family to say, 'I'm sorry.'" In the long run, forgiveness is the best choice for the forgiver and the forgiven.

When we forgive somebody, it's not so much an act of generosity on our part as it is an act of gratitude toward the One who has forgiven us in Christ. ^{That's the whole point of the parable of the Unforgiving servant.} We forgive because we have been forgiven.

Forgiveness is miraculous. When we forgive we do something divine. Forgiveness is divine - God has forgiven us through the death of Christ. God didn't go on ignoring our sin. God didn't excuse our sin. God didn't simply forget our sin. There was point where God could no longer tolerate our sin. So God forgave our sin by taking it upon himself ^{in Jesus Christ.}

On the cross, Jesus gathered all the pain we made God feel, and he felt it there with God. You know how you feel when someone you love deeply treats you with contempt? God, in Christ, felt that kind of pain on the cross, but to a greater degree. You know the kind of suffering and humiliation a slave must have felt at the hands of a slave master. God, in Christ, felt that kind of pain on the cross, but to an even greater degree. I've read about the pain and anguish and horror experienced by an adult when they remember that they were sexually molested as a child. God, in Christ, felt that kind of pain and anguish and horror on the cross to an even greater degree. If you're a parent, you know how you feel when your son or daughter sins, not only against you but against God, and turns their back on the Christian faith and your own values - God in

Christ felt that kind of pain on the cross - and yet he says from the cross, "Father forgive them for then know not what they do."

Forgiveness is not just words, but action. Forgiveness is not merely saying, "I forgive you." Forgiveness is a man holding out his hand to an alienated daughter saying, "I love you. I want to be your father again." Forgiveness is a woman holding out her hand and saying, "I want to be your wife again." Forgiveness is a man or woman holding out there hand and saying, "I want to be your friend again, your partner again. Let's be reconciled."

Fred Buechner, in one of his books writes that "to forgive somebody is to say one way or another, 'You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend."

There's someone close to you or far from you whom you need to forgive today. Someone you need to forgive for the upteenth time. Write a letter. Make a telephone call. Visit. Don't put it off. Go and forgive, not in word only but in reality and in action.

Let us pray: God of mercy: Help us to forgive, as you have forgiven us. Help us to trust you, even when hope is failing. Help us to take up our cross daily and follow you in your redeeming work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sources:

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William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, Lord, Teach us.