

FORGIVING PEOPLE WHO ARE HARD TO FORGIVE

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 15, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 23:32-34a; John 20:19-23.

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

Every family I know needs forgiveness. In the family, we're supposed to protect and love each other, not destroy each other. But most of those who hurt us are people we're closest to - parents, brothers and sister, spouses, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. No matter how respectable a family may be, it can't escape some of the acts, words, and attitudes that can severely damage other family members. Many of us clearly remember incidents that happened years ago; it's as if they happened yesterday. Some of us remember being struck, being slapped in front of friends and other family members. We remember the exact words spoken, the tone of voice, and the expression on the family member's face. We try to block these things out but they return uninvited. Sometimes the abuse we receive from family members is so painful that we suppress the memory altogether.

When you look into the faces of family members who're making life miserable for you, do you ever wonder what life would be like if you could learn to love each other again, if there would be healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness? Maybe someone who used to live under the same roof with you now lives far away and you never try to contact them. You're unable to forgive them, because they've hurt you deeply and angered you so badly.

Trying to get even leads only to a vicious circle of retaliation. By nature, we don't easily forgive- we nurse grudges for a long time. How can there be forgiveness in a family where members often hurt one another severely? Sometimes the hardest people to forgive are family members.

If anyone had a right to withhold forgiveness from family members it was Joseph.

Imagine how you'd feel - a seventeen year old boy, going out to find your ten older brothers. When you find them, your brothers attack you, take off your robe, and talk about killing you. You're terrified. There's no one to hear your cries. Your brothers throw you into a deep pit from which you can't climb out. Bloodied, bruised and dirty, you lie at the bottom of the pit looking up at the hate in their eyes. When a caravan on its way to Egypt comes by, your brothers decide to sell you as a slave. You're bound and carried away to a far land. How do you forgive family members when what they've done has caused you so much pain?

The story that we read this morning provides some direction as we struggle to forgive family members who've hurt us. One day ten men from famine stricken Palestine came to Joseph to buy grain. When Joseph realized that they were his long, lost brothers, he must have relived those painful memories of rejection and hatred. Yet, somehow, he was able to forgive his brothers. He eventually came to say to his shocked and terrified brothers, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph graciously forgave his brothers. How was he able to do it?

1. For one thing, Joseph forgave slowly. When his brothers first came to him he concealed his identity and accused them of being spies. He threw his brother, Simeon, into prison. He warned his brothers that Simeon wouldn't be released until they brought back to him their youngest brother, Benjamin. When they brought Benjamin he accused Benjamin of stealing his silver cup. Joseph forgave his brothers, but it was only after he had reduced them to abject terror. I don't believe this is an example for us to follow. But the Bible is an honest book. It recognizes that forgiveness often comes slowly and

with great difficulty.

Don't believe anybody who tries to tell you that forgiveness is easy. I know people overwhelmed with a sense of guilt because devout Christians assure them that it should be easy for them to forgive. They feel they should forgive. They want to forgive. But they also feel hatred and vengeance in the heart. When they attempt to forgive, contempt spews forth. Forgiveness is often, nigh impossible.

As a boy, C.S. Lewis, the British Christian scholar who wrote wonderful children's stories, was badly hurt by a teacher who physically and emotionally abused him. This sadist turned the life of his boys into a living hell. Lewis couldn't forgive this teacher for most of his life. It troubled him that he was unable to forgive his old teacher. But not long before Lewis died, maybe only a few weeks, he wrote a letter to an American friend.

Dear Mary... do you know, only a few weeks ago I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I'd been trying to do it for years; and like you, each time I thought I'd done it, I found, after a week or so it all had to be attempted over again. But this time I feel sure it is the real thing...

Maybe, if Lewis had lived a little longer, he would've discovered that he had to forgive his old school master again.

So, first of all, forgiveness comes slowly for most of us.

2. But, secondly, it's easier to forgive someone who shows penitence. Joseph found forgiveness almost irrepressible when he saw that his brothers were sincerely penitent. His brothers had changed. They weren't the same jealous, murderous men who had sold him into slavery. They were protective of their little brother Benjamin who like Joseph was his father's favorite.

But what about people who haven't changed? How can we forgive them? Must we demand repentance before we forgive people who hurt us? Should we hold back our

forgiveness when the other one holds back on repentance? Should we waste our forgiving on someone who doesn't want it or who doesn't admit he or she needs it?

It seems to me that we've got to try to forgive people even when they show no signs of changing. Sometimes people die before they've gotten around to repenting. But we need to forgive them anyway; even if they've died and are unable to repent. We need to forgive people who've shown that they aren't sorry, if for no other reason, so we can get on with our own lives. Sometimes our own pain and hurt can't be healed until and unless we forgive even the impenitent.

There's a saying in an ancient Jewish document called the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: "If a man sin against thee... if he repent and confess, forgive him.... But if he be shameless, and persisteth in his wrongdoing even so forgive him from the heart, and leave to God the avenging" (Smedes, Forgive and Forget).

Lewis Smedes writes, "Unrelieved resentment is like a videotape inside your soul, playing its tormenting reruns of the rotten things somebody did to you, playing it over and over, wrenching your soul tighter every time it plays. You get hooked into it; you become a hard-core addict and you cannot leave it alone. Your resentment has you shackled to the everlasting pain of a raging memory. Your only hope is to find the freedom of forgiveness." So, it's easier to forgive if the person you want to forgive is penitent, but we need to try to forgive even the impenitent.

3. It's a little easier to forgive if we can see God's providence working, despite the hurts we have experienced. Joseph was finally able to forgive because he saw God's hands at work despite his brothers' sins. God, in God's providence, used the sin of Joseph's brothers to send Joseph to Egypt where, years later, he would save them.

Let me share with you a personal experience that illustrates this. When I was a teenager my father did something that I found very difficult to forgive. He became senile. The incredibly strong, witty, playful, proud, strong-willed man who had been my father, abandoned me and became a drooling invalid who embarrassed me before my high school friends. I couldn't forgive him for doing such a thing to me. I was terribly angry with him. I'd shout at him at times. I'd even slap him and tell him to snap out of it. I realize now that I was more in need of forgiveness than he was. It was so irrational. But, at the time, I felt like he'd become senile on purpose and I couldn't forgive him. Years later, however, I began to see God's hand in all of this. Not that God caused my father to become senile, but God used my father's senility to put me on a search for a deeper relationship with God, my heavenly Father. As I drew closer to God, my heavenly Father, I began to be able to forgive my father for becoming senile. I began to be able to forgive him for hurting me in ways of which he wasn't even conscious. In the same way, Joseph found it easier to forgive his brothers because he could see God's hand bringing him to Egypt to save his family.

4. Finally, it's a little easier to forgive if we, ourselves, have received forgiveness. Self righteous, smug people never go to God and say, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," but those who realize they've sinned cry out for mercy and receive it through faith in Christ. Once we realize that Christ has forgiven us, it becomes easier to forgive others.

All of us need to open the door of our hearts and receive the forgiveness of Jesus. All of us need to open the door of our homes and invite the living Christ into our families over and over again. When Christ is absent from our homes there's rancor and bitterness, jealousy and envy. But when he becomes the center of a family, his grace and presence

make us kinder, more understanding, more love, and more forgiving than we ever were before. Forgiveness is sort of a miracle. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of vengeance. Forgiveness enables us to start over and try it again with the person who caused us pain.

How do we forgive people who are hard to forgive?

1. We usually forgive slowly.
2. It's easier to forgive if the person you want to forgive is penitent, but we need to try to forgive even the impenitent.
3. It's a little easier to forgive if we can see God's providence at work, despite the hurts we've experienced.
4. It's a little easier to forgive someone difficult to forgive if we, ourselves, have received forgiveness.

How do you usually respond to people who hurt you? Do you usually go for the jugular? Do you plan revenge every time someone treats you badly? Is getting even a way of life? If we never even want to forgive, never even try to remove a hateful memory and restore a loving relationship, we're in a lot of trouble. If, however, we're trying to forgive; even if we forgive today, hate again tomorrow, and have to forgive again the day after, we're forgivers.

Every family I know needs forgiveness.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, come into our hearts with your Holy Spirit and help us to want to forgive those who have hurt us. Help us to follow your example. Send us your Holy Spirit, so that we may forgive those who have wronged us. Give us the ability to forgive. We pray in your name. Amen.

Lewis Smedes, Forgive and Forget.

Lewis Smedes, How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?

Joel Netherhood, World Shaking Grace, "Forgiveness and the Family", The Radio Pulpit, Volume 35, March 1989, Number 3.