

UNFORGIVING SERVANT

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 16, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; Romans 14:5-12; Matthew 18:21-35.

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

Last week, 22 year old Brian Watkins was visiting New York City from Utah with his family. On the way to dinner the family was attacked by a gang of eight youth on a subway platform. One of the gang cut open his father's pocket to get at his money and punched his mother in the face. Brian jumped to his parents defense. He was stabbed with a 4 inch knife and died 40 minutes later. If you were Mr. or Mrs. Watkins could you forgive those teenagers? Would you ever let go of that resentment which would tend to surge through you the rest of your life? Could you ever totally forgive those gang members who had completely altered the rest of your life.

In one of Charles Schultz's Peanut cartoons Charley Brown says, "I love humankind in general, it's just individual people that I can't stand." As long as we keep the discussion of forgiveness on the level of abstractions it's not hard to deal with. We all know that we owe an infinite debt to God in terms of our own sins, in wandering repeatedly from God's ways, in wasting the gifts God has given us, in forgetting God's love toward us. Every week, fifty-two weeks a year, we come as a congregation before God confessing our sins and each week we hear the familiar assurance of pardon.

And intellectually we know that we ought to forgive our neighbors because God has forgiven us so often. When our neighbors repeatedly sin against us ^{irritate us, offend us, take advantage of us,} all we need to do is remember how often God has forgiven us and we should find it easy to forgive our neighbors and even our enemies. C. S. Lewis, speaking shortly after W'WII to the people of England, said, "Everyone

says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. That sort of talk makes them sick,' they say. And half of you already want to ask me, 'I wonder how you'd feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew.'"

TP Bruce Larson, author and Presbyterian minister, was leading a conference on the subject of broken relationships. One of the women participating asked, "Can God heal a broken relationship that isn't just broken-- that just doesn't exist?"

When pressed for an explanation, she said, "My husband and I never argue and are never angry. We simply have no relationship. He comes home from work, has dinner, watches television, reads the paper, and then goes to bed."

"Is it like that every night?" Larson asked.

"Every night for years," she answered.

How often does this wife forgive her husband, not for drinking too much, not for carousing, but simply for being so incommunicative? Can this simply go on forever? Do I keep submitting myself to someone else's abuse in order to maintain the semblance of a relationship? For how long?

TP No matter how respectable a family may be, ^{even the most respectable} it can't escape some of the ^{even a family as respectable as} ~~the~~ ^{the family of God} acts, words, and attitudes that can severely damage other family members. Many of us clearly remember incidents that happened a decade or more ago; it's as if they happened yesterday. Some of us remember being struck, being slapped; 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.

In the family we're supposed to protect and love each other, not destroy each other. But it doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes, in fact, the family is the place where forgiveness is more difficult to receive or give. At the dinner table^{or Communion Table} when you look into the faces of family members who're making you bitter or whom you're making bitter, do you ever wonder what life would be like if you'd learn to love each other again, if there'd be healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness? Maybe someone who used to live under the same roof with you now lives far away and never contacts you, and you know that the reason is that the person hates you for something you've done to him or her.

The French Philosopher and writer, Albert Camus confessed, "I always forgot. I never forgave." Maybe that's our problem. Forgiving is not simply forgetting. When God forgives our sins it isn't that God simply forgets it or that God pretends that we never sinned or ignores it or overlooks it.

Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning, doesn't mean ignoring. Neither condoning sin or ignoring sin acknowledge the reality of sin and the reality of the broken relationships that always result from sin. Ignoring and

condoning are just kinds of ways of pretending that nothing happened. ~~That's just because it's so deep that it can't be healed, even if it means not looking at it~~

But you can't really forgive unless you admit to yourself that something ~~has happened~~^{is really} really did happen that hurt you. Christian forgiveness takes sin seriously, recognizes sin for the killer it is, demands that it stop. Christian forgiveness recognizes the hurt and the pain of broken relationships. Much of what passes for forgiveness today isn't forgiveness at all. It's simply closing one's eyes to the problem, pretending offenses don't exist.

Forgiveness is always costly. ^{G. A. Studdert-Kennedy once wrote} To forgive someone is to take their sins upon ourselves. Not, of course, to commit those sins, but to feel as if we did. G. A. Studdert-Kennedy, an Anglican Priest and poet, once wrote of

being called on to visit a man who was in prison for forgery and embezzlement. He was a crooked, hard-hearted, cynical man and Studdert-Kennedy couldn't move him an inch ^{towards} ~~nearer~~ repentance. The only sign of softening that he showed at all, was when he asked Studdert-Kennedy to go see his mother.

Studdert-Kennedy writes, "I went. She came down, looking worn and sleepless, and that I expected. But there was something about her which I, being young, could not understand. She was bitterly ashamed, and in my pity for her I wondered, 'What has she to be ashamed of?' And then there came the light, and I murmured to myself: Surely she hath borne his griefs and carried his sorrows; the chastisement of his peace is upon her, and with her stripes he shall be healed, if there be any power that can heal him. He has gone astray and turned to his own way, and Love hath laid on her the iniquity of her son. The mother-heart which knew but little sin, Love hath made to feel exceeding sinful for his sake. I understood and, in a measure, the eternal mystery cleared. That love which a woman can pour out upon her son, and which makes her so entirely one with him, that his sin is her sin, his disgrace is her disgrace, his shame is her shame, is the nearest that we can get upon earth to the love of God; to what God is."

This is what forgiveness cost. Forgiveness is love in action, and love means sin-bearing. When God forgives our sin God doesn't ignore them or pretend that they don't exist, like a permissive grandfather. Forgiveness is costly to God.

I used to almost think of Jesus as an innocent by-stander whom an angry God grabbed ahold of and punished in our place. All his anger having been vented on this innocent man, God was then kindly disposed to us and forgave our sin. Then, again, I thought of the death of Christ as a payment to God for

our debt of sin. We and the whole world had piled up a terrible debt with God because of our sins as though a dollar amount could be placed on our sins. Jesus paid the debt of our sins by dieing on the cross. The debt having been paid, God can now forgive. But somehow those ways of explaining God's forgiveness just don't ring true. Can we really put a dollar amount on sin or on the death of an innocent man?

But then I began to think of the death of Christ, not as the death of an innocent bystander, nor even as a financial transaction by which our sins are paid for. I actually began to see God in Christ. Jesus isn't an innocent bystander whom God punishes in our place. Jesus is God in the flesh. God come down to earth. God with a human heart. A God who bleeds when cut and bruises when beaten. Who gets hungry and feels compassion and gets angry and feels pain. And in Jesus God was taking the sins of the world, my sins and your sins on Godself. Like that criminal's mother, God bearing the shame, feeling the shame, the bitterness, the hatred of you and me and the whole world. And on the cross we see the sins of the world laid on God... we see God going to hell in our place... God feeling the pain and misery and shame of our sins. *God forgives because God loves us so deeply That God wants to restore a broken relationship even if it means not collecting the debt we owe God.*

This is what it means to forgive... to take upon oneself the shame and cost of the offense... not to forget or ignore but to bear the pain... to bear the hurt. *in order to restore a relationship,* Forgiveness is the most difficult thing in the world.

If we're really a Church we're called to be a sin-bearing people which is to say a forgiving people. People who love with the love of God are compelled to bear the burden of the world's sins... and more specifically we're called to bear the sin of your husband or wife, son or daughter, your fellow Christian, the man or woman you work beside in the office or factor... *to forgive in order to restore a relationship,* And your brothers and sisters in Christ are called to bear your sins as well.

We're a body of people who can forgive because we're forgiven, "who have been loved into being lovers" (Studdert-Kennedy). To forgive, though, is to bear a cross.

Only when we forgive can the church really sing God's praises with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.

I think of a story I read long ago by a South African writer whose name I've forgotten. It's the story of two brothers. The older brother was handsome, popular, athletic, and highly intelligent-- a straight A student. His younger brother was a hunch-back, unpopular, clumsy and only an average student -- but he had a beautiful, clear voice and he loved to sing and he sang on every occasion.

Their parents sent them off to a boarding school. One day the hunchback was being taunted and made fun of by some of the students. They were calling him names and just being mean to him. He turned and saw his brother watching in a doorway and his misery began to lift. His popular brother would settle accounts and take up for him. But his older brother didn't. His brother shut the door and pretended never to know that he was being taunted and bullied. From that day the hunchback stopped singing. The song was taken from him and his relationship to his brother ceased to exist.

Years later, during WWII, the older brother was in the army, stationed, of all places in Palestine, in the Holy Land. He had the opportunity to visit the holy places... Bethlehem where Jesus was born... Nazareth, where he grew up... Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives and Golgotha where Jesus was crucified and the Garden Tomb where his body was laid to rest and from which he arose from the dead. And as the older brother visited these places he began to think of his younger brother, the hunchback. He remembered the incident at the school and how he'd been silent. He began to feel remorse for

what he'd done years ago and determined right there and then to find his brother and beg forgiveness. He made his way back to South Africa, found his brother and, in tears, begged his brothers forgiveness and received it. That night, neighbors heard the younger hunchback brother singing once more the most beautiful song they'd ever heard.

The church can sing God's praises with heart and soul and strength and mind only when we forgive others, knowing that we've been forgiven.
