

The Power and Practice of Forgiveness

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Preaching on:

Matthew 18:21–35

Whenever a minister asks a congregation, “What do you want me to preach about?” one of the most common responses is “forgiveness.” Some people say that the reason for this is that Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness are really difficult. I think of it a little bit differently: *Anybody’s* teachings on forgiveness are difficult because forgiveness is just difficult.

It’s interesting that forgiveness is difficult and that despite that we still want to hear more about it. Because there are plenty of difficult things that we’d rather not hear anything about at all. But forgiveness is different because deep down inside of us—even though we think that forgiveness is unfair and maybe too hard—deep down inside we know it would be good for us. We long to let go of the hurts that have bound up our thoughts and our lives; we long to be free!

But sort of like moderate exercise three times a week and eating leafy green vegetables, despite the

fact that we know it would make us feel better, we find ourselves stuck on the couch of resentment, eating a greasy bag of high-calorie curses and processed grudges. We get overwhelmed and we get stuck in the groove of anger, and bitterness, and hurt—which are the toxins that are best cleaned out by forgiveness.

So, I want to talk really practically this morning about what forgiveness is and isn't. First, we've got to get rid of this idea that forgiveness is exceptional. If you search the news for stories about forgiveness, what you'll find is these incredible stories of forgiveness and reconciliation. I read a story this week about a man who became a close friend to the man who murdered his brother. He befriended the man who was in prison for murdering his beloved brother. It's an incredible story. It's a beautiful story. And it's an exceptional story. And it is not what forgiveness typically looks like or what it absolutely requires of us. That man is winning gold in the forgiveness Olympics. God bless him. But don't let him intimidate you. You do not have to be friends with the person who murdered your brother in order to experience the vast majority of the very real, life-changing benefits of forgiveness.

Next, we've got to let go of the very unhealthy stereotypes of Christian forgiveness. Offering forgiveness is not ever about being a doormat, staying in an abusive relationship, accepting injustice, being taken advantage of, or putting yourself in any way in any kind of dangerous or potentially harmful situation. I'll give you a very simple rule about forgiveness: If it's not to your benefit, it's probably not forgiveness. If you don't feel like you can afford it, it's probably not forgiveness. It's some distorted version of forgiveness.

Also, forgiveness is not a way of avoiding conflict. We talked about this last Sunday—Jesus has some pretty good, direct advice for us about how to deal with conflict and the possibility of reconciling with someone who has sinned against you. There is a difference between reconciliation and forgiveness. Jesus says forgiveness is always required—and I believe that's as much for our benefit (and oftentimes more for our benefit) than it is for the benefit of the people who have done us wrong.

But reconciliation is not always required. Jesus says we have to go through the process of conflict resolution together, but whether reconciliation happens or not, it depends on the person who did you harm taking responsibility for what they did. If they can't do that, Jesus is clear, you should cut them out of your life AND you should forgive them. And even if you do reconcile, reconciliation might just mean peaceful coexistence. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to invite this person over for dinner and become their best friend. Forgiveness is much simpler than all that.

So, forgiveness is always for your benefit. It should always come from a place of power. If it doesn't feel like it's to your benefit, it's probably not forgiveness, it's some unhealthy, twisted-up version of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the way we clear the toxic mess of hate and anger and obsessive thinking and the desire for revenge out of our lives. So, how do we do that?

When I was at Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights, there was this one beautiful, warm early spring day. And that evening I just the bug, I wanted to go jogging, so I went out to Riverside Park and headed north. Lovely evening. Gentle breeze. It was getting dark. The little lamps were coming on in the park. Other people were out enjoying the river. I was just in my own head, not really paying attention.

Suddenly, I realized I wasn't on the main path anymore, somehow I'd taken a bad turn. I was basically in the woods directly under the George Washington Bridge. It was dark, there were no lights, and I was on like a dirt path to who knows where. And suddenly up over the hill in front of me comes a group of about 15 teenage boys.

And I was a little scared. They just had an energy to them that made me think they were out that night looking for trouble. And I had to figure out what to do. Do I just turn around and run the other way? That seems a bit disrespectful. So, I decided I'm just gonna give them the benefit of the doubt and run past them. And they beat me with a baseball bat.

And I was lucky, because I realized something was going to happen and I checked over my shoulder and saw the first swing coming at me and I managed to take the blow in a way that it didn't just end me right then and there, and I was warmed up and bigger than them and I managed to outrun them. Nothing was broken, but I was bruised and injured, and I was scared. They wanted to mess me up. I heard later that probably these same kids were assaulting women in the park and they put a Columbia student in the hospital.

So, what is forgiveness here? How do I get started? First and foremost, I remember that I am not better than anybody else. I am not better than anybody else. I am luckier than a lot of people. I am probably luckier than those 15 boys.

When I was in the 6th grade, some big kids jumped me and two of my friends after school and beat us up a little. And so I went home and I got a knife. A knife. It was a utility knife, but it was a knife. And I went back out, I guess to like cut up these kids. I don't know what I could have possibly been thinking. I was angry. And I got lucky.

Because I caught up with these kids, pulled this one-inch blade of this utility knife out, and I was like, "Let's go!" And the big kids laughed and one of them whipped out a butterfly knife and he was like (butterfly knife sounds), and it looked like it was about a foot long. And they beat me up again, without stabbing me, and I went home and told my mom. And so of course my parents went over to their parents' house. And then they came home. And they were like, "Did you pull out a knife?" And I was like, "Oh Yeah." And they grounded me.

I'm not better than those boys. I know what it's like to be angry. I bet they were angry. I know what's it's

like to want to hurt someone. I pulled a knife on someone when I was like 12. I did that. And I'm simply morally lucky that it didn't go way worse than it did. And I'm morally lucky that I had parents who had the time and capacity to unambiguously and forcefully correct my mistakes. I'm not better than the kids who beat me with a baseball bat, I'm luckier. So much luckier.

Even if the sin against us is far beyond anything we've ever done to another person or even anything we think we'd be capable of doing, the path to forgiveness starts with a sort of realistic humility about our own righteousness and perfection. It is very difficult to forgive someone when you feel like they're less than human or when you think about yourself as somehow better than them. I am not better than anybody else. If I remember this, I'm setting the stage for forgiveness.

The second thing we need to do is to actually forgive. Now, this might not sound too profound, but I really mean it. Forgiveness is an act. It is not a feeling. Many of us feel like we'll have forgiven someone once our feelings stop being hurt. So, we wait for our feelings to stop hurting. But that's not the way it works. It's the exact opposite. Once we forgive, our feelings begin to heal.

The king in Jesus' story doesn't just sit there until his feelings stop hurting about losing all that money. Right? We don't know exactly how the king feels, but we know he makes a decision to forgive the debt—from a place of power and having the capacity to afford the loss. He doesn't say, "Oh, well, for some fortunate reason I just happened to get over it now, so I guess you're forgiven." He acts.

We have to do the same thing. If it's a small thing, you may only need to say it once. But if it's a big thing you may need to say it more than once, more than seven times, more than 77 times. We act consciously to affect ourselves unconsciously—to affect the way we feel. We can't just decide we want to be over something. We don't work that way. We have to act out our forgiveness, and slowly over time, your heart and your soul catch up with your act. And then you're free.

It's the way magic or any kind of inner transformation works—you must find a way to enact the forgiveness. You cancel the debt. You write, "I forgive Bob," in a journal 50 times every night right before bed. You take one of those pages, you tear it out of the journal, you fold it up, and you stick it inside your Bible or you hide it somewhere here in the sanctuary, put it somewhere on the altar. Your unconscious mind, your soul, remembers that little ritual of forgiveness, it holds onto it, and forgiveness begins to take a hold of you. The transformation of forgiveness begins with your decision to act despite the way you feel in order to transform the way you feel.

Are you willing to say it with me? I forgive! Will you say it with me? I forgive! Say it one more time, this time say, "I forgive you!" Say it to the person who's got you bound up with hate and anger, "I forgive you!" Say it to them! Say, "I'm no better than anyone else!" And say this one, "I forgive myself!" Say it again! "I forgive myself!" And say this, "Thank God for mercy! Thank God for forgiveness. Thank God I am free!" Amen!