ST BARTS

A Sermon by
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We Do Not Deserve It

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 20, 2022
The Last Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Loving God, forgive us, for we do not know what we are doing. We insult you; we mock you; we wound you—we put you to death again and again and again. But however we falter, you never forsake us. Your grace is greater than our imagining. You wrap us in mercy we do not deserve. Help us follow in the steps of our Savior Jesus, who dared to absolve those who hurt him most, who pardoned his murderers even as they were committing their crimes. Give us such generosity of spirit, that in loving those who do not love us and laying aside the instinct for revenge, we may overcome what is evil with good and so bring about your reign on earth. In the name of the Crucified One, we pray. Amen.

Consider the following assertions: *There is no forgiveness without repentance. There is no forgiveness without accountability. There is no forgiveness without justice.* In these and other statements, modern discourse about forgiveness goes out of its way to stress that forgiveness is not a quick and easy process. To be forgiven, conventional thinking goes, a wrongdoer must seek out that forgiveness, express remorse for the wrong they have done, show how their approach to their behavior has changed, and pledge that they will not engage in such wrongdoing in the future. Forgiveness that is offered to someone who is not completely repentant or who has not been held sufficiently accountable for their deeds is often characterized as meaningless, shallow, and even harmful. Forgiveness, most think, must be guarded closely and distributed judiciously—only to those who prove they are deserving. Forgiveness is not something that can be handed out like candy. It's a serious, weighty, consequential thing—and it must be earned.

Jesus, however, hanging on the cross, does not require anything from those who have wronged him. They do not ask for his forgiveness. They do not say that they are sorry. They do not acknowledge the consequences of their actions or promise to do better in the future. In fact, they continue to cause harm even as Jesus appeals for their forgiveness. And yet Jesus pleads for their forgiveness anyway. While he is experiencing one of the worst forms of suffering imaginable, he is still inclined towards generosity and compassion. In spite of all the reasons he has to lash out in anger, he chooses love and not revenge.

Admittedly, it's not immediately clear that we are supposed to follow Jesus' example. Jesus, we know, is not the average human being. Perhaps his interest in forgiveness is less an indication of where our priorities should be and more a reflection of his superhuman powers. Maybe Jesus shows compassion in ways we cannot. It's also true that, in this case, Jesus is not the ultimate issuer of his murderers' forgiveness. Their actual forgiveness emanates from Jesus' Father, the person who is more immediately recognizable as divine. Perhaps all forgiveness, then, comes from God. Maybe forgiveness is not something human beings can offer to one another. Perhaps Jesus' entreaty from the cross—his remarkable display of kindness towards those who have harmed him—is merely a manifestation of God's

mercy and benevolence, proof that, regardless of the sins we commit and the wrongs we do, God will still offer us a loving embrace.

Yet elsewhere Scripture makes clear that human beings are not just forgiveness' beneficiaries. Human beings also have a responsibility to extend forgiveness themselves. Peter, Jesus' disciple, asks him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus' answer is "not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."[1] Forgiveness, Jesus implies, is not only obligatory but also never-ending. In the Lord's Prayer, taught by Jesus himself as a standard form intended for repetitive use, we ask for our sins to be forgiven "as we forgive those who sin against us."[2] The Lord's Prayer mandates forgiveness; it puts a pledge to practice forgiveness directly on our lips; it requires us to forgive at least as often as we beg for our daily bread. From a Christian perspective, then, forgiveness is not a one-off action reserved for unique circumstances and specific kinds of wrongs; it is an entire posture of generosity in which we are meant to be continually engaged. Moreover, forgiveness is not something we can limit to our friends and minor offenders; it must also be extended to those we least like and those who do us most harm. Both Jesus and Paul urge us to love our enemies. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," Paul warns in his letter to the Romans, "never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord.'"[3]

You can understand why, in recent times, psychologists, philosophers and average believers have been tempted to regulate forgiveness, to soften the challenges it presents, to explain away its more unreasonable demands. Human beings are capable of great evil, and it can be difficult to imagine forgiving those who are guilty of the most gruesome and appalling crimes, particularly when we or those we love are among the affected victims. At the same time, appeals to forgiveness have provided cover for abuses by the powerful and prevented those who lack power from advocating for their best interests. And it's not clear that, when it comes preventing further wrongdoing, forgiveness even works: while forgiveness may provide certain benefits both for those being forgiven and for those doing the forgiving, it's also true that those who have been forgiven often offend again. It makes sense that we would want to ensure that those who receive forgiveness actually deserve it: that they fully regret their choices, that they have reckoned with the harm they caused, that all relevant victims have achieved the closure they need.

But, arguably, our efforts to moderate and control forgiveness have robbed it of its meaning. Forgiveness is by definition a gift, an act of generosity and grace; it is a release from the punitive consequences our actions would otherwise warrant. There are no good reasons for forgiveness except the love and magnanimity of the one doing the forgiving. Forgiveness is never something anyone deserves. By attaching forgiveness to strings—by dictating the steps that it must follow—we make it transactional and therefore moot. The one who forgives only under certain conditions is not actually being generous because, in stipulating how the one who seeks forgiveness can achieve what they desire, the would-be forgiver is lording their power over the one who would be forgiven and therefore punishing them. What has often been seen as normal form of forgiveness, then, might be more properly described as a subtle form of retaliation or revenge. The one who forgives only under certain conditions offers forgiveness only on their terms and only after extracting some kind of payback first. What the forgiver ultimately confers upon the one who initially wronged them is an exchange for ransom; it is not really forgiveness at all.[4]

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[1] Matthew 18:21-22.
[2] Matthew 6:12 (for example).
[3] Romans 12:19.
[4] This sermon in general, and this paragraph in particular, we're informed heavily by a few key sources: Richard Holloway, *On Forgiveness: How Can We Forgive the Unforgiveable?*; Jill Lepore, "The Case Against the Twitter Apology," https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/14/the-case-against-the-twitter-apology-matthew-ichihashi-potts-forgiveness-danya-ruttenberg-on-repentance-and-repair; Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*; Matthew Ichihashi Potts, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*, especially his summary of the work of Vladimir Jankélévitch on p. 45-53

Hanging on a cross, Jesus isn't interested in payback. He does not punish his murderers or demand from them a ransom. He has no desire to teach them a lesson or to hold them accountable. He simply loves them, however little they know, whatever horrors they may have done. He loves us, too, in all our ignorance and sin, and he calls us to forgive and to be forgiven, whatever evils we face, however complicated our lives and our circumstances.

In his poem "Praise," Harry Smart commends God for forgiving sinners, for indiscriminately showering blessings on a whole panoply of unsavory characters. In the middle of the poem, Smart allows himself to be interrupted by his critics. "But you say," Smart inserts, giving those critics voice, "they do not deserve it." Smart is so determined in his rebuttal that he repeats it twice for emphasis: "That is the point. That is the point." *But you say, they do not deserve it. That is the point. That is the point.*[5]

It is not an accident that in this morning's Gospel reading Jesus asks for forgiveness for those who do not deserve it. The point of forgiveness is that it is never something anyone deserves. If we deserved forgiveness, we wouldn't need it, for we wouldn't be in the wrong. Forgiveness is only extended to those whose actions can't be justified, to those who haven't yet atoned, to those who have no legitimate excuse. It is offered freely, without condition, to the undeserving, as a gift.

Praise be to God, who forgives us, though we are undeserving. May we forgive, as we have been forgiven.

Amen.

[5] http://www.harrysmart.net/write/pardon.html.