

## FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER

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Colossians 3:12-17, Matthew 18:21-35

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After the horrific events of this week in Las Vegas, the topic for today seems ever relevant. However when the perpetrator of the violence is dead, and the motive for his actions is unclear, it complicates what is already a challenging process: Forgiveness.

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015—just one day after white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine African Americans during a Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina, Chris Singleton, the college-aged son of one of the victims, said he forgave his mother's killer. The following day, other family members of the deceased addressed the suspect via video conference, declaring that they too, forgave him for killing their loved ones. If they were sincere, and there is no reason to doubt their sincerity, I believe that this act of forgiveness was a miracle!

Forgiveness is a miracle of grace. Given our own limited resources, it is impossible to forgive. Surely these individuals, people of mature faith, were drawing upon the deep well of God's grace in order to forgive this unspeakable act.

Perhaps more than any other topic, the subject of Forgiveness always gets the most feedback, sparking many personal conversations about the need for it, how hard it is to do it, and how freeing it can be to experience it.

I had barely been three weeks on the job as an Interim pastor, when a female elder, a mature believer, stopped by my office. She sighed heavily as she sat down. No small talk that day. She began with what is one of the questions I am asked most often: "How can I forgive? I know I need to...but quite honestly, I am not sure I want to."

Having raised the question, it was as if a dam had broken. Out flowed a story of lies, deception, and the worst kind of betrayal at the hands of a very close and trusted friend.

At one time or another each one of us have found ourselves in a similar situation. How do we forgive?

This morning as we prayed the Lord's Prayer, we sang these words: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Forgive us our trespasses/sins, as we forgive those who trespass/sin against us.

Uh oh. Jesus' teaches us right up front that as much as we need to forgive others, we ourselves stand in need of God's forgiveness as well. No one is without sin. No one is innocent. Sin is the great leveler; sin levels the playing field of life...all have sinned...no one is righteous, no not one, save Jesus Christ himself!

John Ortberg (a Presbyterian pastor), tells a funny story about himself. Early on in his marriage, he and his wife traded in their VW Super Beetle for their first piece of brand new furniture—a sofa. He describes the sofa as being “roughly the shade of Pepto-Bismol”. The salesman tried to dissuade them when he learned that they had young children. “Buy something the color of dirt”, he recommended. But in their naïve optimism they purchased the “mauve” sofa.

As soon as the sofa was delivered, the number one rule in the house became:

“Don't sit on the mauve sofa, don't touch it...don't play on it...don't eat on it, breathe on it! Do not think about doing anything other than sitting on the mauve sofa!”

You get the picture.

Well of course it was only a matter of time before there appeared a stain –a red jelly stain—on the mauve sofa. So John's wife lined up the three children: then 4 year old Laura, 2 year old Mallory, and 6 month old John, for the interrogation.

“Children, do you see that jelly stain? The man at the sofa store says it will not come out. Not forever. Do you know how long forever is? That's how long we're going to stay here until one of you tells me who put the stain on the sofa.”

After a tense silence, Mallory was the first to break.

“Laura did it.”

Laura passionately denied it. On it went...

The problem was that JOHN was responsible for the jelly stain. He remained silent...

(Ah...Confess your sins to one another is the topic for next week!!)

John finally came clean, confessed to his wife, and yes, they are still married.

Forgiving a jelly stain is comparatively easy, in the big scheme of things. Forgiving betrayal, or worse? It is nearly impossible.

But Jesus calls upon us to forgive without qualification. Why? Because that is the way God forgives us—totally, completely. That is the meaning of grace.

To forgive is to release, to let go, to extend mercy, to grant a pardon.

I am addressing the issue of forgiveness before the issue of confession because we are called to forgive, even when no confession has been made.

*Forgiveness is a manifestation of mercy, given when it is undeserved.*

In the best case scenario, forgiveness is offered to those who are truly sorry for their sin/offense, and who are looking to mend or repair the relationship. But sometimes we need to forgive even when there is no sign of repentance or sorrow for the harm inflicted upon us. We forgive for *our* sake...

Jesus himself modeled this for us on the cross when he prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

A woman I know well, had been sexually molested by teenage uncles when she was a youngster. This experience had a life-long impact on her. She had successfully repressed this for the most part until she went to a rape crisis clinic with a friend who needed support. There in the safety of that environment, the childhood hurt resurfaced. She gained new insight and strength. She phoned the still surviving uncle (who was living in another state) and confronted him on the phone.

Did he acknowledge the harm that he had done, the pain that he had inflicted? Did he confess? Did he express regret or sorrow for his actions? Did he ask for forgiveness?

None of the above.

In fact, he laughed. He said, "You'll never prove it". She didn't have to. But she did have to forgive him—whether or not he acknowledged the wrong—in order to set *herself* free!

Bitterness, resentment, the desire to get even—all of these are a part of the picture. But they affect only the wronged party. *When we forgive, we set ourselves free!*

Anne Lamott quote: "Withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die!"

"Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past." (Nora Gallagher)

Withholding forgiveness has an effect on both the wronged party and the person who inflicted the harm. That other person—the perpetrator—may deny it, may never own it or admit to the wrong done. In fact, that person may no longer be living, so there is no longer the possibility of repentance or reconciliation. BUT forgiving that person sets the forgiver free from the past.

**The biblical mandate is clear—we are to forgive one another. But the Bible doesn't really *tell us how to do it.***

**We know we should...we may be ready to, but how does one forgive??**

**First, we must come clean with God ourselves.** The Bible says that when we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sin and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. (I John 1:9)

There are many metaphors in scripture for "sin":

To miss the mark—in other words, to fall short of the targeted behavior.

To be heading in the wrong direction, going down the wrong path. The remedy to that? Turn around. Go in the right direction. Go toward godly behaviors and intentions. Turn your back on evil, wrongdoing, whatever is not life-giving. That is the meaning of repentance. Making a 180 degree turn!

In Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the twelve steps is to make a searching moral inventory—in other words, to look at one's life honestly, without pretense. To look carefully at the good, the bad, the ugly—and to own it.

Having acknowledged the "bad and the ugly", one must then make amends. This means taking steps to mend relationships that were broken as a direct result of one's behavior.

When we come clean and confess our sin to God, the Bible tells us that several things happen:

God chooses to forget or to "remember our sin no more".

God removes it from us. How far? As far as the east is from the west. (Psalm 103) In theory, those two never meet. That is about as far away as one can go!

A friend of mine wrote the following lyric:

'My sin's not held against me  
God cast it in the deepest sea.

Then God/he put up a sign that says:  
"No fishing allowed!"

Ah...this speaks to the truth that while we know that God forgives us, sometimes it is pretty hard to forgive ourselves. We need not continue to punish ourselves, but trust that if God has forgiven us, God can also help us make better choices going forward. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, having been the recipients of such amazing grace and forgiveness, we live in gratitude. We will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, seek to live and forgive others, in the same way that God has forgiven us. That is what we pray in the Lord's Prayer

In the Gospel reading today, Peter asks Jesus: "How many times must I forgive?"

The implication being, someone is a repeat offender. How many times shall we forgive a person like that?

Jewish tradition held that one should forgive up to three times. Peter, magnanimous as he is, doubles that number and adds one for good measure!

"Is seven times enough?" Peter offers his own answer.

Peter is expecting a gold star! But, no. Jesus says, "You're not even close Peter! Seventy times seven! Then, you'll be approaching the level of grace that God extends toward you, and which you need to extend to others."

Oops!

Lewis Smedes, one of my seminary professors, has written several books on the topic of forgiveness....I've given away more copies of this book than any other.

He has some helpful suggestions to keep in mind:

Forgiveness is a process. A process that takes time. It is a journey: the deeper the wound, the longer the journey.

**He suggests there are three stages in forgiveness:**

**First** we rediscover the humanity of the person who wronged us. In other words, we see them as the flawed human being that is in all of us.

**Next, we surrender our right to get even.** This is a biggie, isn't it? Of course, because often we want the offender to hurt as badly as s/he hurt us! The Bible says that vengeance—payback—the right to get even, if you will—is what we leave in God's hands, when we forgive. To do less, is to give sin

more power and control over our lives. When we forgive, we let go and let God even the score, or take whatever action God believes is best in the life of the other.

**Finally, we know that we have forgiven, when we can wish that person—the one who hurt us—well.** When we no longer cringe when we see him/her, when we honestly and sincerely can wish them well—that is when God has brought the healing that is possible when we forgive.

Life is complicated.

Doing our best to live lives that are patterned after Jesus' life, is a challenge.

Forgiveness? It is not easy. But it is worthwhile.

It is a miracle of God's grace, a gift we give ourselves, and our loved ones.

Forgive one another, for this God's will in Christ Jesus, for you and for me.

Let us pray...