

## **“Putting a Human Face on the Enemy”**

24 February 2019: 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 6:27-38

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**“If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?**

**But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered”** (Psalm 130:3-4).

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Jesus offers us no more difficult teaching than his teaching about forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift/discipline/activity we grapple with daily. Whether a hurtful word, or thoughtless action, forgiveness of other’s treatment of us is difficult to contemplate—let alone achieve. Forgiveness is problematic for us mortals, and yet is one of Jesus’ central and wise directives. For those who notice the words of our prayers, a chief claim in our Lord’s Prayer is: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors [or ‘trespasses’]” (Matthew 6:12).

When Peter opts to see how serious Jesus is about forgiveness, Matthew’s Gospel relates: “Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ” (Matthew 18:21). Perhaps we remember Jesus’ reply—so insistent that later when Jesus teaches about not forgiving others he said, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

Yet, Jesus does not simply theorize about forgiveness. Jesus also risks practicing forgiveness. One of the first charges against Jesus in Mark comes when the scribes question Jesus’ healing of a paralytic. They said: “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). Even on the cross, one of Jesus’ seven last words included a word of forgiveness. Dying, Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Even so, forgiveness is not easy, even if we are faithful and believe in Jesus with all our hearts. The act of forgiving someone is difficult. I remember as a young minister, guest preaching. After worship, at the requisite “covered dish” to celebrate missions, I noted how forward-looking the congregation was to have two worship services, although they had enough room to all worship together. In studies of growing churches, two services often helped congregations grow. My lay leader-host said, “Thanks for the compliment, but there is a dark side. Years ago, two of our main families had a big fight that had nothing to do with the church. After the fight they refused to worship together. So, we added a worship service.” He laughed and said, “We call the early service the Hatfield service and late service the McCoy service.”

Stephen was an early church hero and first martyr. He accused the Jewish Christians of being stiff-necked and implied that they were hard-hearted. Acts then recounts the result of such truthfulness: “They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him . . . While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died” (Acts 7:58-60). Certainly, Stephen was an early Christian who understood Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness. Hear what Jesus teaches in our lesson today:

**[27] “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, [28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. [29] If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. [30] Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. [31] Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

**[32] “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. [33] If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. [34] If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. [35] But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. [36] Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

**[37] “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; [38] give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:27-38).**

When wronged, our natural inclination is to fight back or get even. It may be futile to say, but this utterly human reaction is nearly always flawed. Epictetus said, “Forgiveness is better than revenge, for forgiveness is the sign of a gentle nature, but revenge is the sign of a savage nature.” Paul too provides a solid reason for treating others well, even when they treated us poorly.

**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19-21; Proverbs 25:21-22).**

The Lord’s Prayer is never far from the heart and lips of those who believe in Christ: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). To not receive God’s love and forgiveness in Christ is to miss much in life. We could make the case that God created us to forgive and for us to forgive others. Colossians reads: “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col. 3:13). A forgiving God fashioned us to forgive others. This is as biblical as a “life principle” can get.

A childhood accident caused poet Elizabeth Barrett to lead a life of semi-invalidism before she married Robert Browning in 1846. There is more to the story. In her youth, her tyrannical father had watched over Elizabeth severely. When she and Robert married, they held their wedding in secret because of her father’s disapproval. After the wedding, the Brownings sailed for Italy, where they lived out their lives. Although her parents disowned her, Elizabeth never gave up on the relationship. Almost weekly she wrote them letters. Not once did they reply. After ten years, she received a large box in the mail. Inside, Elizabeth found all of her letters—not one opened! Today those letters are among the most

beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents only read a few of them, perhaps it might have started a restoring relationship.

We might suggest that God has written us a series of letters. We call it the Bible. Some of the messages are how to live and give us visions of love, forgiveness, and hope. It would be a real shame if we ended up as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's parents and fail to open up something beautiful intended for us. If we read the Bible, then we read about God's forgiving love for us in Jesus Christ.

A few decades ago, when I lived in Graham, a stranded motorist called me to see if our church could help him fix his car, feed his family, and put them up for the night. I told him to leave the convenience store number where he was and I would help find the things he requested. I made five or so quick calls and got everything lined up. I called him back at the store's pay phone. I called four times and let the phone ring at least ten times on every call. No one ever answered the phone.

Is this how our relationship with God is? God holds everything we need, but we fail to answer God's call.

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