

Sermon for Pentecost XV 2020
Erring and Forgiving

*To err is human,
to forgive divine . . .*

While these phrases do not actually appear in the bible in these exact words . . . nevertheless, you could say these two phrases are said over and over and over again from the Bible's beginning to the end.

Indeed, who among us would not agree with the first statement—that making mistakes, choosing the wrong thing, messing up our lives and the lives of others is *not* a very feature of being human—not just in the big moments of our lives, but the even the small mostly forgotten moments as well.

Humans err.

We make mistakes.

Mistakes seem to come easy to us.

But forgiveness?

Well . . . that definitely seems to be something greater than ourselves, something that, though we desire it, admire it, and even deeply need to receive it and give it away, well . . . to forgive seems to be hard.

It seems that forgiveness is so difficult that it must be the divine—even a miracle or miraculous—

In the story of Joseph and his brothers—Joseph, after suffering rejection, envy, abandonment, false accusation, and years of imprisonment—forgives his brothers for sending him into a lifetime of hardship.

Do not be afraid!

Am I in the place of God?

Even though you intended to do harm to me,

*God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people,
as God is doing today,*

*To err is human . . .
to forgive divine*

What can we say about forgiveness?

As I have shared many times in sermons and in bible studies and other conversations, forgiveness *is* quite literally the good news.

Jesus is our savior and redeemer and Lord

because he is divine mercy and forgiveness in the flesh.

That sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

But then we have to speak about forgiveness while we all struggle to forgive deep hurts from our past—

hurts inflicted here and now—in our families, our communities, our churches, our nation and our world.

We live, after all, in a world where we are surrounded by humans who err incessantly and we are humans who err time after time after time.

Perhaps we need to begin by saying what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness is not denial.

Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense, a wrong, a sin, doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt.

Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change,

or along ourselves to be abused and mistreated

because "God wants us to forgive and forget,"

or because we assume that God isn't interested in justice.

Forgiveness isn't the same thing as healing or reconciliation.

Healing has its own timetable,

and sometimes reconciliation isn't possible.

Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even if we have forgiven them.

Secondly, forgiveness isn't a detour or a shortcut.

Yes, the gospel is about forgiveness—giving and receiving.

And yet, it calls us first to repent—to mourn, to lament, to burn with

zeal, and to hunger and thirst for right relationships,

relationships that are life-giving and just.

Forgiveness—in our Christian faith—isn't a palliative—
that is, a gesture that is an excuse or panacea.

Forgiveness works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance
and transformation.

In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil
with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.

German pastor and anti-Nazi dissident,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that we must never allow
forgiveness to degenerate into “cheap grace.”

That is, “the preaching of forgiveness” without repentance . . .
or “grace without the Cross.”

The third thing about forgiveness for us humans is
that forgiveness is not instantaneous.

If we are honest, we know that human forgiveness is a process—
a messy, non-linear, and often barbed process
that can leave us feeling healed up and free one minute,
and cut up and bleeding the next.

In my experience, no one who says the words “I forgive you”
gets a pass from this messy process,
and no one who struggles extra hard to forgive
for reasons of temperament, circumstance or trauma
should feel that they're less godly or spiritual than those who don't.

Just consider that before Joseph forgave his brothers,
he wrestled with a strong desire to scare and shame them.

In fact, he actually did scare and shame them.

Forgiveness was something Joseph had to arrive at,
slowly and painfully.

There was no cathartic “altar call” moment
when the hurts of his past slipped off his back and rolled away.

There was only life . . . human and messy

lived on layered, complicated, and unsentimental moment at a time.

Like all humans, Joseph was created for goodness.
For being a part of building up a just and nurturing world.
For being part of a family that would keep him and each other safe.
Just as Joseph did, when we experience the good world being ripped
away from us, is appropriate, it is human and healthy—
to react with horror, shame and disgust in the face of evil.
One of the great gifts of the gospel is that it takes sin and sin's deadly
consequences very seriously.

Sin wounds.

Sin breaks.

Sin echoes down the ages.

And so forgiveness isn't so much an escalator as a spiral staircase.

We circle and circle and circle again,

trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered
and the new life we seek.

Sometimes we can't tell if we've ascended at all;
we keep seeing the same broken landscape below us.

And yet . . .

slowly, slowly, slowly our perspective changes.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, the ground of our pain falls away . . .
and we rise.

So if forgiveness isn't denial or a detour, and it isn't quick—
then what is forgiveness?

What is Jesus asking of us when he asks us to forgive seventy times
seven, to love, bless, pray, give, lend, do good, without judgment, extend
mercy, and, oh, yeah, turn the other cheek?

In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*,
Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness
is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.

Nora Gallagher writes,

*Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself
from the constant pressure of rewriting the past.*

Father Henri Nouwen wrote that

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour . . . Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.

If these three theologians are correct,
then I think forgiveness is choosing to put love in the foreground
instead of putting resentment in the lead.
If I'm consumed with my own pain,
if I've made injury my identity,
if I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger
in every interaction I have with people who hurt me,
well . . . then I am drinking poison,
and the poison will kill me long before
it ever does anything to my abusers.
To choose forgiveness
is to release myself from the tyranny of bitterness.
Forgiveness is to give up
my frenzied longing to be understood and vindicated
by anyone other than God.
Forgiveness is to cast my hunger for justice deep into Christ's heart,
because justice belongs to him,
and he's the only one powerful enough,
divine enough to secure it.

Perhaps we are often squeamish about forgiveness
because we misunderstand the nature of unconditional love.
Putting God's all-embracing love in the foreground
doesn't for one second mean that we relativize or ignore evil.
If it did, God's love would be cruel and weak,
not compassionate and strong.

But where we humans make love and judgment mutually exclusive—
where we cry out for revenge, retribution, and punishment—
Divine love and grace hold out for restorative justice—
a kind of justice we can barely imagine,
a kind of justice that has the power to heal
both the oppressed *and* the oppressor.

Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber has a beautiful sermon on forgiveness where she describes mistreatment as a chain that binds us. Here's what she said in conclusion:

Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't combat evil. Maybe it feeds it.

Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level start to become them.

So, what if forgiveness, rather than being a [weak, flimsy] way to say, "it's okay," is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us?

What if it's saying, "What you did was not okay, but I refuse to be connected to it anymore."?

Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter.

And free people are dangerous people.

Free people aren't controlled by the past.

Free people laugh more than others.

Free people see beauty where others do not.

Free people are not easily offended.

Free people are unafraid to speak truth to ugly stupidity.

Free people are not chained to resentments.

And that's worth fighting for.

So to err is human
to forgive is . . . well, Christ-like.

My hopes and prayers this day, in this time and place—
for myself and all of us—
is that we will take up the hard work of forgiveness
for the sake of both wholeness *and* justice
that the world so desperately needs.
This is the most important work we can do for the life of the world.
May we realize more and more that Christ wants to loosen,
to remove, the chains that bind us.
May we rise.
May we, by the helps of God's grace,
taste the full measure of the freedom Christ offers us . . .
and err more often on the side of grace.