

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 14, 2014
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:8-13
Romans 4:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Our Scripture lessons today continue the theme from last week, which had to do with relationships in the Church, and especially with the issue of forgiving those who hurt us.

In looking at our lessons for today, I want to address two issues in the time we have together. The first issue has to do with the alternative to forgiveness, that is, what happens when we choose *not* to forgive?

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis has Joseph being reunited with his brothers after his long ordeal which they caused. You will notice here that the brothers are afraid. They are fearful that Joseph is going to “do something” to get back at them or get even with them. So much so that they cook up this story. They say, “Joseph, dad told us to tell you to go easy on us, not to harm us.”

They are fully prepared for Joseph to be vengeful. To return evil for evil. To do something violent to them. That is often the alternative to forgiveness.

Joseph takes another approach, though. He says, “Am I God to you?”

[Note: Joseph anticipates Paul’s words from last week’s epistle: “never avenge yourselves, but leave it to God, who will repay.”]

Joseph says, “as far as I’m concerned, what you meant for evil against me God meant for good, so that I might be able to help many people.”

And Joseph forgives.

Our Gospel paints a similar picture in the parable of the unforgiving servant. Note again how the alternative to forgiveness is violence. Look at the images.

First, the king is going to sell a man and his entire family into slavery until his debts are paid. That’s a negative cycle of pain, brothers and sisters.

Second, the unforgiving servant approaches the man who owes him a small debt, and Matthew tells us he “grabs him by the throat and shakes him” and demands payment.

Yes, forgiveness may be difficult. But the alternative is not very appealing, either. For when anger, bitterness, and resentment grow, they will eventually find a place to explode, doing a lot of damage in the process.

The second issue I want to explore involves exploring why forgiving others can sometimes be so difficult. I have several theories I want to share with you.

First, forgiveness can be hard because it transcends rational thought.

Rational thought would tell us that when someone hurts us deeply, we should just

sever the relationship. Call it quits. Pull back. Build a wall so that we won't be hurt like that again.

Frederick Buechner says:

To forgive somebody is to say one way or the other, "you have done something unspeakable," and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less.

However, I refuse to let it stand between us. (Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, pp. 28-29)

Forgiveness can be difficult precisely because it involves doing not the rational thing, necessarily, but the *graceful and merciful* thing. Forgiving someone may not always be the rational thing to do, but it is always the *right* thing to do.

A second reason why forgiving others can be difficult is because *by holding on to the pain of what someone has done to us, we can look good by comparison, at least to ourselves*. Nursing a grudge or carrying around the pain can be an excuse for us to become self-righteous. Holding on to that pain allows us the opportunity to see ourselves in a favorable light when compared to others.

A third reason why forgiving can be difficult is because *losing an enemy can be as upsetting as losing a friend*. Think of the conflicts occurring in the Middle East, or in Northern Ireland, or in Iraq, or parts of Africa right now. If persons would refuse to let their enemies be enemies any longer, think of how things would have to change. Whole new ways of being would need to be learned, because forgiveness *transforms us*.

I don't mean to oversimplify what are extremely complex issues, but when folks have spent centuries learning to hate each other and view each other as enemies, losing an enemy can be quite traumatic.

Still another reason why forgiving others can be hard is because *the actions which need forgiven are the very actions which we find impossible to see ourselves ever doing.*

Why is it hard to forgive adults who harm or molest innocent children? Because we cannot envision ourselves doing such.

Why is it hard to forgive a serial murderer, or rapist? Because we cannot imagine ourselves acting in such ways.

Why would it be hard to forgive someone who slandered you and destroyed your reputation? Because you cannot possibly imagine yourself doing that to somebody else.

The actions which cause us so much trouble and for which we find it hard to forgive are often those which we can never conceive ourselves doing.

Simon Wiesenthal has spent most of his life seeking to bring perpetrators of the holocaust to justice.

On one occasion, he was brought to the bed of a dying Nazi who years earlier had participated in the burning and murder of dozens of Jewish children.

This soldier wanted to confess his unspeakable acts to a Jewish person in the hopes of finding forgiveness.

Upon hearing the grueling details of the story, Wiesenthal was overcome, and had to leave the room, unable at that point to grant the soldier's request.

A few years later, Wiesenthal found himself in Germany at the home of the dead soldier's mother. He listened to her reminisce about her son. She knew nothing of his past deeds, and spoke in glowing and loving terms about her beloved son. She had no idea what he had become or the atrocities he had committed.

Wiesenthal thought about it, and decided to leave this woman in peace, not telling her about her son's murderous acts.

Do you know what I believe allowed Wiesenthal to do that? *I believe that he was able to see in himself the capacity to do the very things which others had done, things he so deeply abhorred.* He saw himself not merely as a victim, but also as one with power to be a victimizer. And forgiveness became possible at that moment.

And a final reason why forgiving others can be difficult is because *accepting forgiveness is the starting point for granting it into the lives of others.*

Forgiveness is not a human invention or act. Forgiveness has its starting point in God. It is because God loves us and forgives us that we are both called on and empowered to forgive others.

As a pastor, I've seen countless people struggle with issues of forgiving others, and at times the center of their struggle is the fact that they have never totally been able to accept the forgiveness God has granted them. God has forgiven them. *But they cannot forgive themselves.* And because they are still angry at themselves and feel such a deep sense of unworthiness, they project that forward onto others and have difficulty forgiving them.

I think we should look at the unforgiving servant partially in this light. His debt was so massive that one scholar has translated it into modern categories by saying that his debt was equivalent to the entire payroll of the North American division of General Motors. It was impossible for him to repay it.

Normally, being forgiven greatly enables one to forgive greatly. But that's true only if you have truly received the forgiveness. If you carry your past mistakes and sins around with you and beat yourself up over them and allow yourself to live in a spiritual torture chamber, then you haven't fully entered into the reality of your forgiveness. And that makes it difficult to forgive others.

The root meaning of the term "forgive" means "to loose a person from what binds him." It starts with God, and then it extends *to us* and *through us* to others.

Some of you here today may be struggling, either to forgive yourself or to forgive others. And I will not deny today the fact that forgiveness may be one of the most difficult things we are asked to do.

But in light of this I ask you to ponder two questions: First, do I like the alternative to forgiveness, and the consequences it will produce?

Second, the psalmist tells us that God does not stay angry forever. If God chooses not to stay angry forever, why should we -- either with ourselves, or others?

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let us come with the words of our sequence hymn on our hearts and minds:

*Forgive our sins as we forgive, you taught us, Lord, to pray
But you alone can give us grace to live the words we say.*

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.