

Sermon July 21, 2019 FC
“Is Anything Unforgivable?”
Genesis 50: 15-21 and Matthew 18: 21-35

Sadly, our era is filled with events that test, if not defy, our understanding -- the mass shootings at Parkland and Newtown, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the 9-11 attack on America. And then there are the horrors that were not simply single events but ongoing outrages – the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, the genocide in Rwanda and the Holocaust. And the reports of child and spousal abuse, the revelations of sexual harassment and rape reflected in the *MeToo* movement shock us too. Indeed, these events stay with us because they starkly and repeatedly force us to think about the fundamental things of life -- evil, suffering, courage, self-sacrifice, death, love, and forgiveness.

Webster’s dictionary defines forgiveness as “to cease to feel resentment against one”, or “to grant relief from.”¹ Of course, I accept these definitions -- for who am I to challenge Webster. But I must say it seems to me that there is forgiveness and then there is **real forgiveness** and that distinction doesn’t come through in a dictionary definition. Sure one can forgive a debt. We do it all the time. Haven’t you found yourself saying, “You don’t need to pay me back – it’s my treat.” Perhaps the proper verb for such moments is not “to forgive” but “to excuse” – for you see to excuse something is to say “Oh it’s OK; it is not that big a deal.” But that’s not the forgiveness that Parkland and 9-11 demand. That is not the hard stuff that challenges us in life.

Everyone has said or thought at one time “that’s unforgivable” upon learning of some act or omission. We each have a list of things tucked away in our minds that may be unforgivable: genocide, 9/11, mass shootings, child abuse, and rape. All of these share a common element. These acts all fundamentally negate the victim’s humanity. Each of these actions diminishes the worth and value of another human being. They all manifest the power of one person -- not only to hurt another -- but also in a fundamental way to demean and devalue their basic worth as a fellow child of God.

The horror of the holocaust is not simply the murder of 6 million Jews, Gypsies and other human beings -- though that is unspeakably evil; but as part of that process of

¹ Webster’s *New Third International Dictionary* (Springfield: G & C Merriam, 1971) p. 891-892

extermination, the Nazis month after month, year after year stripped the Jews and others of their humanity. First, the Jews were not allowed to hold certain jobs, then they lost the right to hold property, then they lost their freedom to travel and to assemble even for worship. And finally when they were no longer seen as fully human their lives were taken. Hannah Arendt, the great sociologist, has called such things that involve the negation of another's humanity, "radical evil". Each of these kinds of events challenges us to determine whether there are limits to our forgiveness.

The Bible addresses the importance of forgiveness almost as often as it addresses the importance of "love". The two scripture passages we just heard center on forgiveness. The first is the poignant conversation between Joseph and his brothers after the death of their father. You will remember the story of Joseph. He was one of twelve brothers and the favorite of their father. His brothers really resented him and even plotted his murder. But instead Joseph ends up being sold as a slave and taken to Egypt where he rises to the highest position in that land just below the Pharaoh. Eventually, the brothers are forced to go to Egypt to get food during a famine in Canaan. They must go before their brother Joseph, the keeper of the Egyptian stores of grain, to plead their case. Ultimately, he recognizes them, embraces them, forgives them and saves them from starvation. But the brothers are still guilt-ridden. They worry that Joseph has said and done all this only because of their father. Their father having died, they wonder whether Joseph -- now knowing of his father's death -- will do an "about face" and punish them. In our passage the brothers are again seeking his forgiveness and he reassures them.

The second passage from Matthew begins with an exchange between Peter and Jesus about how often one must forgive another. Rabbinic law of that time said three times. Peter in our passage says 7; Jesus replies 77 times. And then to emphasize the importance and the unlimited nature of forgiveness he tells, what is often called the parable of the "unforgiving servant".

Quite clearly forgiveness is central to the Judeo-Christian faith. Why is it so important? Think about what would our world look like without forgiveness? Wouldn't it be a world of grudges, of disputes that divide and ruin families, of vengeance, of getting even? In short it would be a world devoid of mercy. It would be as close to Hobbs' description of the state of nature as "nasty, brutish and short" -- as one can

imagine. Why-- because we all transgress. If we live in a world in which each transgression must be avenged or allowed to fester because never forgiven -- then frankly we are doomed.

When Jesus said that forgiveness must be done “77 times”, he was saying that there is no limit to forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be quantified; it is not a calculation. If we have to forgive someone over and over for the same transgression, we can (to be honest get really frustrated). The truth is that forgiveness gets harder the more its needed. But Jesus says forgiveness knows no bounds. It is not a weighing of what has happened to us or to others. Instead, forgiveness stems from realizing that there are at bottom things that connect us with all people – a spark of humanity that is loveable, which is matched by the reality that we all transgress. We are bound together by our unlimited potential to do good and the reality that at times we all fall short.

This point was brought home to me many years ago when I was a law clerk for a federal judge. I attended the trial of a man who had pistol-wiped a bank teller for no reason during a robbery, causing severe, permanent brain damage. It was the most brutal crime with which I have personally ever been involved. After the trial I thought this man was quite clearly a monster with a long record of violence. And then I read the presentence report about how three years earlier this guy had donated one of his kidneys to his brother to save his brother’s life. The horrific nature of his crime was no less because of this -- but I saw with different eyes the complexity of human beings.

Of course, who knows this better than God? The essence of Easter is that God forgave humanity even though we killed God’s son. Good Friday was not followed by the end of the world but by Easter morning. God forgives us not matter what. Remember Jesus words on the Cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” This is precisely the point of the first scene in Matthews’s parable. The King forgives the servants debt of 10,000 talents. Doesn’t sound like much; yet, it is extraordinary. A talent of silver weighed 40 pounds. This was a debt that could never be repaid. And that was precisely the point. The King (read God) forgives our transgressions no matter what, no matter how large or venal. There is no giant scale in heaven that identifies when the transgression is too heavy to be forgiven. And having made this point the Gospel writer implicitly asks – us to do the same. And so the servant having been forgiven is

challenged to forgive his debtor. Despite his own remarkable good fortune he, nonetheless, fails to forgive his debtor. He fails to pass on God's forgiveness and suffers the consequences.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" or perhaps more apt forgive us our trespasses and we forgive those who trespass against us." Words I suspect we say without much thought each Sunday. Perhaps we will hear them with fresh insight now.

These final two verses in our passage from Matthew can make us uncomfortable.

"And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

What a seemingly cruel God -- where is the love? But retribution is not the real point of these verses. The essence is that the only thing that is unforgiveable is failing to forgive. Why? Because when we cannot or do not forgive our debtors -- our transgressors -- we are not in relationship with God. Forgiveness is the act that connects us not only to those we forgive but also to God. It is in that moment -- in that act -- that we affirm the essential goodness of creation and that we all are children of God. Forgiveness is not always easy. Sometimes the hurt is very deep. But when we are unable to forgive, we are no longer acting in God's image; we are disconnected from God, we are punishing ourselves.

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Jim was a wonderful member of the First Church in Chappaqua when I was there. He was the one who unbeknownst to others drove the sick to doctor's appointments and checked in on the shut-ins. He was a pillar of scouting for decades. He was a wonderful father, husband and friend. He faced however an enormous challenge. How to deal with his feelings towards the man who killed his father during the robbery of his father's hardware store. Jim simply could not forgive him. No one can doubt the difficulty in doing that. Perhaps, I would have reacted the same way. I don't know. We talked frequently about this. I admired Jim. But what I saw that he couldn't see was that he was punishing himself. No day went by without him anguishing over the murder and the loss of his father but also feeling guilty about his own reaction. He was robbed of the ability

to remember with joy his father and he was prevented from moving on with his life. He was hostage to his anger.

Alexander Pope famously wrote in his poem, *An Essay on Criticism*, “to err is human, to forgive divine.”² I would rephrase it to read “to err is human, to forgive is to act in God’s image.”

A concentration camp survivor Corrie ten Boom wrote a book about her experience called *Hiding Place*. And throughout her life she traveled and talked extensively about her experience.

On one occasion in Munich, a man came up to her after she finished speaking, and she recognized him. He had been a prison guard in Ravensbruck, a man who had been so cruel to her and her sister. He extended his hand to Corrie ten Boom, and he said, “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think, as you say, ‘He has washed my sins away.’”

All the horrible memories of the past flooded into her mind. She struggled to raise her hand but it wouldn’t move; it remained at her side. “forgive me, Lord, Help me forgive him,” she prayed. Nothing happened. Again she prayed, “Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.” Corrie ... describes what happened next like this: “As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang love ... that almost over whelmed me.”³

I know that there are some here who are not convinced that all acts are forgivable. I stand by my belief that that is what God desires. But let’s be clear about the process of forgiveness, it is complicated. There are two distinct aspects to it. First, the process of forgiving by the one hurt. That is what we have focused primarily on today. But there is also the process of being forgiven. Before we can be truly forgiven, we as the transgressor must acknowledge our sin. And so it is that the servant in Matthew acknowledges to the King that he owes the money and desires to make good. That is an essential part of forgiveness. To be forgiven means we must acknowledge our mistakes -- our transgressions and we must deal with the consequences. Forgiveness isn’t complete until that happens. If a spouse has been unfaithful that individual must acknowledge his or her transgression and accept and deal with the consequences of it to be fully forgiven.

² Alexander Pope , *An Essay on Criticism* (line 325)

³ James W. Moore, *Jesus’ Parables of Life* (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2005) pp 80-81 (quoting Corrie ten Boom, *Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) p. 238

So we can forgive the perpetrators of genocide or racism but that forgiveness is incomplete until they acknowledge their evil acts and help to ameliorate the consequences. There is no such thing as cheap forgiveness. But what Jesus is saying to us is that we should never be the one to stand in the way of forgiveness. God forgives – no matter what -- so too should we. Amen