

The Lord's Prayer: 4) Forgiven and Forgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

March 13, 2005

Most of us are aware that Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb, but most of us do not know about the difficulty he had with those filaments which hold the electricity. For over two years he made numerous attempts and invested \$40,000 in the project, until one night the light bulb stayed lit for over twenty hours. Jubilant that he had finally achieved his goal, he handed the bulb to his assistant to wrap and place in a cabinet. On his way to the cabinet, the young man dropped the bulb and it broke into a million pieces.

Edison had every right to be extremely angry and lash out. Instead he immediately set out to make another bulb. And what did he do when it was completed? He handed it to this same assistant to put in a safe place.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Few of us find it easy to quickly forgive and move on when we have been hurt or violated by another. Forgiveness is a process of repairing a broken relationship. It takes time, healing, energy, and love.

This morning we want to look at what forgiveness is not, what it is, and how we can move toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We may forget small wrongdoings, but the memory of deep hurts will likely last a lifetime. We remember, but in forgiving we no longer use the memory against others. Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Nor does forgiveness mean dismissing or denying the hurt. Forgiveness takes an offense seriously; it does not pretend that the transgression didn't really matter. It doesn't just shrug it off, saying, "Aw, that's okay." The offense is real, but when we forgive, it no longer controls our behavior. Forgiveness is not denial of our hurt.

Forgiveness is not condoning. You need not excuse the bad or hurtful thing done to you. "Our sense of fairness, our convictions about justice, our need to hold persons accountable for their behaviors all argue strongly against excusing harmful attitudes and actions....Forgiving is not tolerating the intolerable. Yet we can forgive a *person* whose *actions* remain condemned. Distinguishing between the person and the act is crucial to the integrity of forgiveness."¹ Forgiveness is not excusing wrongdoing.

Forgiveness does not mean that we will cease to hurt. Some wounds are deep and we may hurt for a long time. Continued emotional pain does not mean that we have failed to forgive.²

Forgiveness is not reconciliation. It takes two people for reconciliation to occur, and sometimes forgiveness does lead to reconciliation. An injured party can forgive an offender even when reconciliation is not possible.³

Anthony Bloom writes that forgiveness does not mean “putting someone on probation.” We may think we’ve forgiven someone only to catch ourselves watching for evidence that the person’s behavior merits our clemency. “To grant forgiveness at a moment of softening of the heart, in an emotional crisis, is comparatively easy,” says Bloom. “Not to take it back is something that hardly anyone knows how to do.”⁴ Forgiveness is not putting someone on probation.

I’m working toward forgiveness in two major areas of my life. It has been helpful for me to review what forgiveness is not. I cannot forget what has happened. I cannot excuse the behavior experienced. I am still hurting. But I desire to forgive so that I can be released from this heavy weight that burdens me and free that energy for more positive tasks.

In seeking to understand what forgiveness is, it is enlightening to look at the original languages. The Greek word for forgive means to leave off, to release, suggesting that forgiveness is a release of that which blocks one’s relationship with another. The Aramaic word also has a sense of a deep letting go, of letting go of the mistakes that tie ourselves and one another in knots. We know how tension often is carried in our bodies by knots in our muscles. Likewise, brokenness or separation from others often feels like a tangled knot that is often difficult to unravel.

Sin is a condition of separation from God and from one another. This separation results from failures, mistakes, accidental offenses, frustrated hopes, or tangled threads. It implies that some mending or restoration is needed. The process of releasing must happen regularly and consistently in order for our knotted relationships to become whole and stable once again.⁵

Forgiveness is releasing the offender from the alienating effect of an offense on our relationship. It says, “What you did was wrong, but I release you from its penalty.” Harboring resentment and hatred closes us and causes us to become stuck in the past.

Releasing the wrongdoing, letting it go, opens us to a new future. It breaks the law of retribution. When we are offended, instead of offending in return, we forgive. It is a decision not to seek revenge or nurse a grudge.

The energy formerly expended in resentment and bitterness can be used for more positive purposes.

Forgiveness can have a freeing effect both on the victim who is forgiving and the perpetrator who is forgiven. The victim of wrongdoing makes a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded them from the sentence of judgment, however justified that may be. The offender is freed to receive our grace and God's grace.

A journal once had on its front cover a picture of three U.S. ex-servicemen standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. One asks, "Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner of war?" "I will never forgive them," replied the other. The mate says, "Then it seems they still have you in prison, don't they?"⁶ Forgiveness releases us from bondage to past wrongs and frees us to live fully in the present.

As we consider the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," we realize that the first task is to receive the forgiveness God offers for the sins we commit. Just as "we love because God first loved us," so we can only forgive because we have first been forgiven.

We begin the process of awareness by acknowledging that we ourselves are imperfect and fallible. We make mistakes, just as those who have wronged us. John Patton says that "Human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something—that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive."⁷ We participate in the tangle of broken and disordered relationships from which we all suffer. We hurt others intentionally and unintentionally. We stand in the need of forgiveness.

And so we pray, "Forgive us our sins." We do so believing in the totally gracious, generous love of God. From the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus could have cursed his executioners and prayed for their judgment and punishment. He could have waited for them to apologize or repent. Instead, reflecting God's great love even for those who work against God, Jesus offers forgiveness.

"A soldier asked one of the desert fathers if God accepted repentance. After the old man had taught him many things, he said, 'Tell me, my dear, if your cloak is torn, do you throw it away?' He replied, 'No, I mend it and use it again.' The old man said to him, 'If you are so careful about your cloak, will not God be equally careful about [God's] creature?'"⁸

God desires reconciliation with us. Recognizing our errors and our participation in systemic sin, we seek forgiveness. In opening ourselves to receive, we take in the freedom and release offered. The cords of our mistakes that bind us in knots are loosened. We are forgiven.

Forgiven, we can move toward forgiving. It is important to acknowledge the hurtful situation as an unchangeable piece of the past. We can grieve what has been lost, whether it be a trusted relationship, a position or job, personal well-being, or whatever has been violated. We can give ourselves permission to feel, especially the anger and passion of the hurt. We can take time to heal; forgiveness is a process. It is helpful to get support in exploring the hurt and moving toward wholeness, to have a safe place to share our stories and to reflect on the journey toward healing. We can claim appropriate power to express our pain, in confrontation if appropriate, in setting boundaries, or perhaps in a symbolic action.

These steps are helpful in moving toward release, letting go of the desire for revenge, and praying for those who persecute us. Forgiveness does not always issue in reconciliation or renewed trust with the offender. But it does untie the cords that keep us knotted together. The other is freed from the alienating effect on the relationship.

Forgiveness also frees the one forgiving. It frees us of the need to judge and punish others, leaving vengeance to God. Forgiveness releases our hold on others' faults and liberates that energy for positive purposes. The ability to forgive is a quality of a person who is spiritually at peace. Forgiveness demonstrates that the power of love is stronger than the power of the offense that separates us. Forgiving with grace shows the face of God to a world blinded by pain and rage.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has written a book called *No Future without Forgiveness*. It tells the powerful story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which sought to elicit the truth about the atrocities of apartheid and bring healing and hope to that broken land. Painful stories of hatred and violation were told by perpetrators to victims. Amazing moments of forgiveness and reconciliation were experienced. This process has been lifted up as a possible model for healing the lands of Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, Iraq, and other nations brutally torn apart by violence and bloodshed. As violence and hatred seems to grow from local streets to courtrooms to battlefields, we need to take to heart Jesus' prayer that we be forgiven and forgiving people. The small injustices in our personal circles can be magnified on a global scale. While we may feel

powerless to impact the world crises, we can seek to forgive in our own personal worlds and so lessen the negative energy that can be so destructive.

Bishop Tutu says, "It isn't easy, as we all know, to ask for forgiveness and it's also not easy to forgive, but we are people who know that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future. If a husband and wife quarrel and they don't one of them say 'I am sorry' and the other says 'I forgive,' the relationship is in jeopardy."⁹

May we live as forgiven people of God, receiving the grace and courage to be forgiving people of God. For there is no future without forgiveness.

- ¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *The Way of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), p. 60.
- ² Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 187.
- ³ Kenneth Gible, "Understanding Forgiveness," *Alive Now*, March/April 2003, The Upper Room, p. 6.
- ⁴ Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1966), p. 31.
- ⁵ Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), p. 31.
- ⁶ *Spirituality and Health*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (New York, Trinity Church: Spirituality & Health Publishing), p. 272.
- ⁷ John Patton, "Questions About Forgiveness," *Circuit Rider*, March 1997, p. 12.
- ⁸ Mius 3. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 150. Quoted by Roberta C. Bondi, *A Place to Pray: Reflections on the Lord's Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), p. 93.
- ⁹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 151.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church