

Embracing Forgiveness: It's So Difficult
March 12, 2017
Psalm 121 & John 3:1-17
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

A father and son, living in Spain, had an argument and became estranged. The son left home and the father traversed the whole country looking for him. Finally, in Madrid, the father found himself standing outside a newspaper office and decided to place an ad, hoping the son would see it. It read, "Paco, all is forgiven. If you read this, please meet me in front of this newspaper office next Saturday at 2 pm. I want you to come home." The next Saturday, the father showed up at the newspaper office only to find 800 young men named Paco who wanted to reconcile with their fathers.

Sometimes, things happen in families and relationships are broken. Forgiveness can be unbelievably difficult for us, but we know that forgiveness needs to be offered and accepted.

Everyone has a story about someone who has done something so bad to them that they cannot bring themselves to forgive the other. Or, perhaps we have done something awful and another person refuses to forgive us. Finally, and perhaps the worst of all is when we have done something for which we cannot forgive ourselves. What is it about this forgiveness thing that is so tough?

In Matthew 18, Peter (probably feeling a little proud of his magnanimous notion) asked Jesus, "How many times must I forgive my neighbor, seven times?" We know that seven was a special number for the Jewish people. It symbolized perfection and wholeness. In other words, it didn't necessarily mean just seven times, but *many* times. Jesus, often given to using exaggeration as a teaching method, burst Peter's bubble by saying, "No, but seventy times seven." He used the same "perfection" numbers, but escalated the required result. Interestingly, the rabbis of Jesus time taught that one should forgive up to three times. One time, the person could have made a mistake. Even two offenses could be accidental. Three was starting to become extreme. Beyond three offenses, and one would think the person was offending on purpose!

Forgiveness is no easier for us than it was in Jesus' time. When we see it as a job to be done, it can weigh heavily on us. On the other hand, if we see the need to forgive as a gift from God, that is a deal changer. It is not that we like to have people do bad things to us, but the bad things that happen shape us. If all of life was wine and roses, how

would we really grow? When we see the need to forgive as an opportunity for growth, it can really be a gift for us.

Sometimes it is hard for us to accept the gift of forgiveness. For some reason, we stay in the place we are and refuse to accept the gift. Barbara Crafton, in her video series entitled, *Embracing Forgiveness*, tells a story about the gift of a plane ticket to Hawaii. (Don't worry, for those of you who will be attending the class this week, this spoiler is only one of many things she shares!). Suppose someone gives you a ticket to Hawaii. At this time of year, with snow in the forecast, it seems like a good time to run off to Hawaii. If we refuse the ticket or take it and put it in a drawer, we will never make it to Hawaii. You can't get there without receiving the ticket and using it. In the same way, we cannot know what forgiveness is like if we never receive it.

Sometimes we like the place we are in where we neither offer nor receive forgiveness. I have a friend who talks about people who hold grudges. He says, "She doesn't just hold a grudge, she lives with it; she savors it; she loves it; she takes care of it." We can be like that.

Most everyone has heard of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the poet. You may know that, due to a childhood accident, she lived her life as a semi-invalid. You may not know that she was raised by a miserable, tyrannical father. Elizabeth and Robert Browning had to be married in secret because her father did not approve. After marrying, they moved to Italy where they lived the rest of their lives. In an attempt to keep the door to relationship open, Elizabeth wrote letters to her parents every week. Ten years into her marriage, she received a box that contained every letter she ever wrote to them – unopened. What a shame they never bothered to read the letters and to mend the broken relationship. Can you imagine how beautiful ten years' worth of letters written by Elizabeth Browning must have been?

Every week we pray the Lord's Prayer. Some of you pray it every day. It also speaks of forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." "Forgive us our sins in the same measure that we forgive those who sin against us." It is not that God refuses to forgive us if we don't forgive others. After all, God is in the forgiveness business. Maybe, just maybe, if we do not forgive others, we cannot truly know the experience of being forgiven.

In today's Gospel lesson we heard what may be arguably the most famous scripture of all time. "God loved the world so much that God gave the only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." That is the part we see on the billboards. Perhaps verse 17 is just as important or even more so than verse 16.

“God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but so the world, through him, might be saved.” When we think about God’s great, forgiving love, we, too, are able to offer forgiveness to others. In so doing, we have a burden removed from us.

In the Children’s Time, I talked about a pencil with an eraser. Forgiveness doesn’t make the wrongdoing go away. No matter how well you erase, there is still a shadow on the page. The eraser allows us an opportunity to try again, to make things right. “Forgive and forget” is really not a helpful saying. There is a price to be paid for sin, but that does not relieve us of the need to forgive.

There is good news. We don’t have to go it alone. “I lift my eyes to the hills from whence my help comes.” We are not alone in this journey. God is always with us. God nudges us to offer forgiveness and to receive forgiveness – even when we need to forgive ourselves. God knows “our going out and our coming in.”

Our world says to hang on to the wrongs dealt us. Hold a grudge. Stay angry. The truth of the matter is that doing that diminishes us. Go out and be a people of forgiveness, forgiving others, receiving forgiveness from others, and forgiving ourselves. May it be so. Amen.