

“Forgiveness: It May Not Be What You Think”

Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42

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Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

Life in the world of Google is so much fun. I googled “Quotes about Forgiveness” and found all sorts of things from the sublime to the ridiculous. Here are two that are somewhere in between. I’ve always enjoyed the writings of Oscar Wilde. He said, “Always forgive your enemies – nothing annoys them so much.” Then there is the actress, Marlene Dietrich who said, “Once a woman has forgiven her man, she should never reheat his sins for breakfast.” I looked up quotes about forgiveness because part of today’s sermon is about coming up with a useful description of this work that can be so hard for us.

The Israelites’ trek through the desert for 40 years proves both that God is a forgiving God and also a patient one. Let’s face it, these people were whiners. Of course, they had some big challenges like no food and water, but not enough trust that God would provide. Their anger toward God and their situation usually was taken out on Moses. “Did you just take us out of Egypt so we could die in the desert?” If you were Moses, what would you do with that? Well, Moses took it to God and basically asked, “What are you going to do about this?” God always provided for the people, but no matter how many times provision was made, the people still did not trust. God had to forgive their lack of trust and their lashing out over and over.

What does forgiveness mean for us, though? There are a lot of things said about forgiveness and some of them are just plain wrong. Some of them are something else, but they are not forgiveness. Sometimes it is helpful to define something as that which it is not. You’ve heard the phrase, “Forgive and forget.” Some may even think it is in the Bible. It’s not, by the way. If you think you have to forget something in order to forgive another person, you are not going to be very good at forgiveness. The wrong that was done is a part of history. You experienced it. You cannot somehow shove it down as though it never happened.

Forgiveness is something we do that is perhaps more about us than it is about the other person. In her *Embracing Forgiveness* series, Barbara Crafton tells a story about someone who is new to a church deciding to go to a church potluck. This person makes their casserole – yes, the Episcopalians are as into their casseroles as United Methodists – anyway, she took her casserole and put it in the food line. She went through and prepared her plate and went and sat down next to a woman who had been at the church

for a number of years. They introduced themselves and made some small talk. Then the longtime church member told her about her husband leaving her for the associate pastor. He left her with three young children. She was still angry with this man for what he did. The thing was, this didn't happen recently; it happened 15 years ago. She was still holding the anger and had not forgiven him. Think about it for a moment. She gave time to this hurt every day for 15 years. How much do you suppose the ex-husband was thinking about it? Not at all. And, by the way, that associate pastor is now a bishop and they have a completely new family. Who was paying? The former wife.

Forgiving could have freed her from a past that she could not change. Forgiveness is really about the present and the future. I cannot change the past, but I can make some decisions about what my present is going to look like. I can decide if what happened some time ago is going to continue to influence my life in negative ways in the present and future.

That does not mean that forgiveness is easy or even quick. Forgiveness is not something that is a moment in time. It is a process. We can dig ourselves in and, indeed, we can truthfully say we do not want to forgive another for what they have done to us. However, if we can say, "I want to want to forgive," we are beginning down the road that leads to freedom.

When Jesus was at Jacob's Well in Samaria, he met a woman there. She came to draw her water at noon, which was not the time when that was usually done. She probably came at that time because she was shunned and mistreated by the other women of the village. Because of that, she came to the well at the hottest part of the day. Jesus recognized all that she had done that the other women used as a reason for ostracizing her. He didn't play the blame game, though. Instead, he offered her the living water that would keep her from being thirsty ever again, at least in a metaphorical sense. He offered her forgiveness and offered her life. She ran back to the village and told everyone, "I have just met a man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?" She had received the forgiveness she needed to offer Christ to the rest of the people of that town.

We don't know if reconciliation and restoration of relationship with the other women of the village ever happened. Forgiveness does not guarantee that type of restoration. We live in a time when domestic violence is rampant. Someone may forgive their abuser, but that does not mean that the abuser can ever come back to that place to live. The person often is remorseful, but is not able to keep themselves from abusing again in the future.

If you had to complete the statement, "Forgiveness is \_\_\_\_\_," how would you do it? At the beginning we said that sometimes it is easy to define what forgiveness is not. For example, forgiveness is not forgetting, forgiveness is not pardoning, forgiveness is not saying that someone never did what they did and therefore they get off scot free. At the same time, what can we claim that forgiveness is? It just means that you've let go of the anger or guilt towards someone, or towards yourself. But that can be easier said than done. If forgiveness was easy, everyone would be doing it. Remember, you don't forgive someone for his or her sake - you forgive them for your sake.

Remember, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "It has been said, but I tell you this..." about several things. Forgiveness may not be what you have been told. It may not be what you think it is. It is not easy and requires constant practice. I challenge you to think about forgiveness this week. What is it for you and how can forgiving others bring you freedom?