

Can We Forgive? Part Two

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Matthew 6:9-15

In a small town somewhere in the United States a twelve year old boy named John was playing with the nine year old girl who lived next door. Her name was Marie. Unfortunately, they found a loaded pistol in a dresser drawer and before long their make believe game turned into a tragic nightmare and little Marie was dead.

Everyone in the small town attended the funeral of Marie, everyone that is except for John. Twelve year old John couldn't face anyone and refused to talk to anyone.

The morning after the funeral, Marie's older brother went next door to talk to John. "John, come with me. I want to take you to school." John refused saying, "I never want to see anyone again. I wish it was me that was dead." The brother insisted and finally persuaded John to go with him.

The brother talked with the school principal and asked him to call a special assembly. Five hundred and eighty filled the gymnasium. Marie's brother stood before them and said, "A terrible thing has happened. My little sister was accidentally shot by one of your fellow classmates. This is one of those tragedies that mars life forever. Now I want you all to know that my family and John's family have been to church together this morning. We shared in Holy Communion."

Then he called John to come forward and stand next to him. He put his arm around John's shoulder and continued, "This boy's future depends on us. My family has forgiven John because we love him. Marie would want that. And I ask that you love and forgive him too." Then he hugged John and they wept together.

This is an act of forgiveness. Yet, Marie's family will continue to struggle with love and forgiveness every day of their lives. And John will struggle to accept this love and forgiveness every day of his life. Marie's brother sought out John when he needed it most and put aside his own grief to offer love and forgiveness. He also offered a public witness. He invited the entire community to practice forgiveness.

I pray that none of us have to practice forgiveness in such a terrible situation. There are examples of forgiving in dire circumstances. For example, the Amish who practiced forgiveness to the man who killed 5 school girls, or some of the people who lost a loved one on 9/11, or Elle Weisel forgiving the German people for the dreadful Holocaust.¹ We see people in our own lives who have forgiven; the driver who seriously injured a loved one, or the person down the

¹ *The Power of Forgiveness*, Produced and Directed by Martin Doblmeier, (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2017), DVD.

street who forgave the person who torched their home. Sometimes we think of the people who have forgiven as saints, and we don't think we can do the same.

Most of the time when we forgive it is a person who has left us or hurt us with words they have said or betrayed us with a behavior. Forgiving in these circumstances is just as difficult as any of the situations I described. It takes courage and strength to forgive no matter the magnitude of the offense. We may not be able to forgive with our human strength, but I assure you that we can forgive with God's help.

Last week we talked about some basic concepts and some misunderstandings about forgiveness. There is one more idea that I want to mention today.

Some people think forgiving is a sign of weakness. Strength is the characteristic that is valued in our culture and forgiving someone is viewed as giving in to the other person, not a sign of strength. The logic is something like: "If I forgive, I am saying what the other person wins because the person will never have to admit that what they did was wrong. If the other person wins, I lose. If I lose, then I am weak."² The dichotomy is that one person wins and the other loses; one person is strong and the other person weak. This of course is not true, but the perception that only one person can be strong exists in many parts of our culture. Forgiveness is a sign of strength.

Now I want to spend a few minutes talking about theology. Before all of you doze off let me explain. We know that God forgives; we know that God forgives us. Last week and this sermon series is mostly focused on human forgiveness; how we forgive one another. I want to spend a few minutes talking about God's forgiveness. Because there is a difference between God's forgiveness and how we forgive one another. If we don't clarify how God's forgiveness differs from human forgiveness, we get confused on what forgiveness is.

Remember the definition of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Second, forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered. The first part is about our relationship with others. The second part is about ourselves.

Both God's forgiveness and human forgiveness share the characteristic of letting go of the offense and not wishing ill will toward the person who committed the offense. Beyond this basic characteristic, divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness look very different.

Understanding God's forgiveness is important, and I believe that God's forgiveness is part of God's nature. One difference between God's forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness is that we believe God's forgiveness wipes the slate clean. We know that God can remember our offense, and we usually say that while God can remember our offense, God chooses not to. In interpersonal relationships we follow the definition that forgiving doesn't mean that we need to forget the hurt or say that the hurt was justified.

A profound difference between God's and human forgiveness is about the reconciliation of the relationship. Last week I said that only after going through the process of forgiveness, do we make the decision on whether to reconcile with the person who has hurt us. When God

² This logic is based on conversations I have had with parishioners.

forgives us the relationship is restored; and in fact, the relationship was never broken. Now, we may doubt that God has forgiven us or we may feel distant from God and feel the relationship has been damaged. When we feel distant it is because we have moved away, not because God moved away from us. God is always in relationship with us.

Our text today gives us a very good reason to forgive. Jesus was with his disciples and they asked Jesus how should we pray? Jesus gave the disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer. Every week when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Now I think everyone of us believe that God forgives and when God forgives the slate is wiped clean. The Lord's Prayer tells us that God's power to forgive us is contingent upon our power to forgive. God will forgive our trespasses if we forgive others and if we don't forgive others, then God will not forgive us.

Just in case you don't think our theology is enough to forgive, forgiveness has health benefits. In addition to the theological reasons to forgive there are health benefits to be gained from forgiveness. Only recently has science taken up the challenge of determining if forgiving is good for our health. In one study using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) people were asked to imagine a hurtful experience they had had. Each person was asked either forgive the person who had caused the hurt or hold a grudge toward the person. The people who chose forgiveness showed signs in the brain of better mental health than those who held a grudge.

Other studies also show that forgiveness plays a role in physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals and in families, communities and nations. Everett Worthington has developed a scale to measure forgiveness between people. People who showed higher motivations for revenge or avoidance of a person who had hurt them had less relationship satisfaction and less commitment to being in relationship with others and in community.

So far, all studies and indications show that forgiveness has a positive effect on our health. Let me close with a story of someone who couldn't forgive by themselves, but with God they found forgiveness.

Corrie Ten Boon was a woman who lived during World War II. She lived in the Netherlands and she and her family hid Jewish people in a secret room in their home. She later wrote of her experiences in her book, *The Hiding Place*. She and her family were arrested and put first in prison and later in a concentration camp. Her sister Betsie was with her on this journey.

One day, Betsie was cruelly whipped by a guard for not working hard enough. But Betsie did not give in to hatred. She prayed for the guards as much as she prayed for the prisoners. Corrie found this very difficult, but Corrie says that somehow Betsie seemed to have risen above all the suffering, and to be living very close to God.

After the war Corrie preached about God's love. She preached in many countries. She tells the story of one experience in a church service in Germany. After the service an SS guard came forward. Corrie says suddenly she was back in the concentration camp. She could see Betsie's pain, the tattered clothes, and the starvation that the prisoners lived with daily.

The guard held out his hand to shake the hand of Corrie Ten Boon. Corrie held her hand at her side. She had preached often about the need to forgive people, yet now that she was in this

situation, what would she do. She prayed. Lord Jesus, forgive me and help me forgive him. Yet even as she prayed, she felt nothing. She felt no love or charity, not the slightest spark. So again, she prayed. Jesus, I can't forgive him. Please give me your forgiveness.

Then she looked at the man. She tried to smile. She reached out her hand. As she took his hand, she says the most incredible thing happened. From her shoulder all along her arm and through her hand, she felt a current pass between she and the guard. She felt a love for this guard that she didn't think was possible. It was not Corrie that could forgive, but God. God gave her the grace to feel the love and forgiveness for this guard that had so harmed her and her sister.

Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasizes the need for the practice of forgiveness. "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. It is impossible for he who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."³

If we can't forgive, we can't love. Our call to love God and love our neighbor depends on our ability to forgive. As Christians we need to open our hearts to releasing the hurt, we have felt and being prepared for healing and wholeness.

Amen.

³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, Gift ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 44.