

Can We Forgive? Part 4

by Rev. Dr. Linda Holbrook

Sermon given at Morgan Hill United Methodist Church on February 20, 2022

Colossians 3:12-14

Today we are finishing the sermon series on forgiveness. We have talked about what forgiveness is, and shared stories about people who have forgiven. We have said the definition of forgiveness is when we no longer have any desire to get even or for revenge on the person who hurt us. And the second part of the definition is that we have peace of heart and we are no longer controlled or obsessed by the hurts and wrongs we have suffered.

Our Scripture this morning comes from the book of Colossians. In this book attributed to Paul, is about the behavior that Christians are supposed to exhibit to each other. First, Paul reminds us that we are God's chosen and we are holy and beloved. We are to treat each other with compassion, kindness, meekness and patience. Further, we are to forgive each other as Jesus has forgiven us. Finally, we are to love one another. In this text there is a little difference than the other texts we have looked at. In this text we are called to forgive as God as already forgiven us. We are to follow God's path of forgiveness.

Last week we talked about the process of how to forgive. This process is from the *Book of Forgiving* by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho. The first step is to tell your story. Find a safe place and at least one person to share your story with. Until each of us is able to tell our story, we can't forgive.

The second step was to name the emotions we felt. Some of these emotions may be deeply buried and it may take time to discover the underlying emotions. No matter how long it takes we need to determine what our emotions are.

The third step is to forgive with the help of God. This step may not be the same for everyone, but it does involve prayer. We pray not to change the other person or to change the past, but to change how we view the past.

The fourth and final step in forgiveness is another choice. We must decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed us or to release the relationship. It is important that this step to reconcile or release is only made after we have forgiven. After the hurt if we just avoid the person, we might want to think that is releasing the relationship, but it is not. If we avoid the person, we are pretending the hurt didn't happen. It is only after going through the process of forgiving that we can make the choice to reconcile or release the relationship thoughtfully.

Let me share two stories of forgiveness; one where no reconciliation was made and the other where reconciliation was made. There was a woman who was abused by her husband. This abuse went on for several years. At first, the woman said things like, "if only I hadn't questioned him" or "I caused him to be angry and hit me." After several years and with the help of friends from her church she realized that she was not to blame for the abuse. She had told her story and named her hurt through this faith community.

This woman decided to leave her husband. It took a few more years. Eventually, she was able to forgive him. She wished him well. She released the relationship by telling her ex-husband, "I forgive you in my heart, but I will never let you in my home again. You are not welcome in my home."

There is another story of reconciliation. The day Anthony Colon heard his older brother had been gunned down in East Harlem, he began struggling with a rage that would last for years. The anger wore him down. He missed his brother desperately. He hated the three men who had fired 13 bullets into his brother who was unarmed.

"Oh, God, it just -- it just put so much hate in my life. I hated everybody. I hated everything. It made me to be a person, like a monster," said Colon, who considered his brother Wilfredo his only stable family. "I loved him because he always stood up for me from a little kid. He would not even allow me to fight. He would stand up for me, whatever happened, because he always saw that goodness in me."

But it is difficult to hold onto this deep anger for years, and as the years passed the fog of anger began to lift. Anthony married and had two children. He started attending church and welcomed religion into his life. And, he was overwhelmed by a desire to find reconciliation with his brother's killer. "I just wanted it to be okay," he said.

Then one summer day, a chance encounter while visiting a friend at the Eastern Correctional Facility in Ulster County, New York, changed his life. He looked across the room and saw Michael Rowe, one of the men who had murdered his brother. Rowe saw him too and tried to duck down. "I was expecting that we would be you know, it would be a fight, some type of physical violent altercation," said Rowe. Rowe recalls feeling remorse and shame, unable to forgive himself for murdering another young man -- and afraid of retaliation.

Colon walked straight up to him and said: "Brother, I've been praying for you. I forgave you. I've been praying I would see you again." The meeting transformed both men's lives.

After going through the process of forgiveness, we can make the choice to reconcile or not to reconcile.

I want to conclude this series with one other thing about forgiveness. Many times, it is more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive others. Adam Hamilton tells the story of one person in his congregation talking about forgiveness: "I struggle almost daily. I can see how God works in other's lives, but in my own, I struggle. I know that God loves me no matter what I've done or been in my life, but to really feel it at the core of my being, I struggle"

This person speaks for many of us who struggle with forgiving ourselves. If we have trouble believing that God forgives us, how can we possibly forgive ourselves? And even when we believe that God has forgiven us, we still struggle with how we could forgive ourselves. We have high expectations of ourselves, and we don't feel we should make a mistake.

The reasons for forgiving ourselves are the same as the reasons we forgive others. Forgiving ourselves is giving up on the idea that we need to make ourselves pay for the mistake we made. Forgiving ourselves is how we free ourselves from the hurt and from the past. Forgiving ourselves is how we heal and grow. Forgiving ourselves is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-care, and tell a new story of who we are. Forgiving ourselves leads to internal peace.

Now there is one concept related to forgiving ourselves. This concept is the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is feeling bad about something we did. Shame is feeling bad about who we are. I have mentioned that my dad was alcoholic and in my case, and in many cases of homes with an alcoholic person, there is a shame based system. For many years I felt the problem was about who I was. If you feel like you deserved what happened or that you caused what happened, that may be an

indication that you are dealing with shame. We all are children of God and we all deserve dignity and respect. Every one of us is a loving, kind, and compassionate person at our core. We deserve to be forgiven and we deserve to forgive ourselves. Self-forgiveness is true self-acceptance. So as you deal with self-forgiveness, you may need to ponder whether you are dealing with guilt or shame.

Self-forgiveness requires absolute truth. We face the wrongs we have done and we admit that we are flawed individuals in need of forgiveness. Self-forgiveness requires humility and hard work. It requires the desire not to repeat the behavior and a desire to change. Self-forgiveness requires having love and compassion for ourselves.

Jesus tells us to love others as we love ourselves. And sometimes we love others, but don't share that love with ourselves. If your friend or family member was suffering and came to you, what would you tell them. My guess is that you would have kind and compassionate words for them. If you don't use the same words for yourself, then you need to learn how to forgive yourself.

Now one question we usually ask is how do you know when you have really forgiven the person who has hurt you? There is not a one size fits all answer. For some people they know they have forgiven when a huge weight is lifted. For other people it is an overwhelming sense of peace. For still others it is being able to look at the person without feelings of anger or resentment. For each of us we need to learn to trust our hearts. This may sound unusual, but we will know that we have forgiven someone if we will listen to our bodies. Our bodies carry all the hurts and wounds we have. You may feel it in your shoulders, or your gut, or your muscles, or somewhere else. Your body knows if you have truly forgiven someone who hurt you.

And once we have forgiven, we have a new story to tell. The facts of the hurt we experienced haven't changed, but the story will now include something about the story of the person who hurt you.

Forgiveness is a way of life. Forgiveness is not easy and takes effort, but choosing to forgive heals our wounds, helps us to grow, and assures us that we are following what Jesus asks of us. Choose today to start forgiving.

Amen.