

With Christ In the School of Prayer

FORGIVING THOSE WHO HAVE HURT US

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Genesis 50:15-21; Luke 23:32-38

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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On December 27, 1983 two men met in a prison cell in Italy as the world looked on. The two could not have been more different—one a Christian, the other a Muslim; one a Pole, the other a Turk; one a Pope, the other his would-be assassin. You may remember the day, May 13, 1981, during an audience in St. Peter’s Square, Pope John Paul II was shot twice in the abdomen by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turkish dissident.

Rushed to the hospital with dangerous loss of blood, the Pope was in surgery for several hours and survived the attack. Recovering from surgery, from his hospital bed, Pope John Paul asked people around the world to “pray for my brother, Mehmet Agca, whom I have sincerely forgiven.” A year and a half later, two days after Christmas, the Pope met quietly with Agca in his prison cell, offering forgiveness, blessing him and praying with him. The Pope later arranged a meeting with his mother and brother. Agca subsequently spent 20 years in that Italian prison, then was extradited back to Turkey to serve time for an assassination attempt he had plotted there.

In this unusual act, both to pray for his would-be assassin from his hospital bed and later to visit him and pray with him, millions were inspired, others utterly confounded. But in doing so, Pope John Paul was embodying the Way of Jesus for us all.

There is a priority and urgency about this Prayer of Forgiveness in Jesus’ life and teaching. He began His ministry teaching the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15) “...*forgive us our debts, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS.*” He ended His earthly life on a cross, praying “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” (Luke 23:34)

Now, I am well aware that today, in this congregation, I am treading upon a whole mine field of raw nerves. As we pause to reflect on this portion of the Lord's Prayer, and really take it seriously, a thousand "but's" stammer from our lips. "But...what about my business associate who betrayed me, cheated me, lied to me?!" "But...what about my ex-wife or husband who insulted me, judged me, abused me, until I had to get out just to survive?!" "But...what about my father who deserted the family and left my mother and all of us struggling to survive?!" "But...what about the drunk driver who killed my father on the road?!" I have my own "but's," especially when it comes to those who have hurt my children; that is among the hardest to forgive.

Yet the fact is, those who have hurt us can either make us *bitter* or *better* for it, depending on how seriously we take Jesus' life and teaching at this point. It is important to hear Jesus in this regard not as another Law-giver like Moses, but as the great Lover of our souls, the Healer of our spirits who would have us freed and cleansed. John's Gospel begins with the words: "*The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" (John 1:17)

But how? How can we forgive, when the bitterness boils over at the injustice of it all? And what does that Forgiveness mean? It seems wrong headed to shrug our shoulders, and just say "Oh well" to the outrage. When we have been hurt, and are lucky enough to get an apology, we may wave our hand and say, "Oh, it was nothing." There may be grace in that; but there certainly is no truth in it. If we follow the Jesus Way of "*grace and truth,*" is there not a place for calling the offense what it is? Naming the hurt? It takes much more courage to forgive in that risky way, but in the end truth is served and grace is given.

But here is the genius of the order of the Lord's Prayer. "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" We come to the Lord first with *our* confessions, *our* sins, *our* own brokenness. As expressed in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, "we do a fearless moral inventory of our own lives." If we are to give *grace* we need to own up to the *truth* about ourselves as well as about the offender's action that hurt us. When we do that, then we are more likely to come to the offender with our complaint, without it being poisoned by the illusion of superiority.

But how to move toward forgiveness, if it is just impossible for us right now? Joseph gets us half way there. His theology was hammered out on the anvil of injustices he endured¹-first in the pit his brothers threw him into; then in the prison when he was falsely accused of trying to rape the wife of Potiphar, his Egyptian master. Out of all that, Joseph came to know God in two crucial ways—first, that God is the only wise Judge, we are not. At the conclusion of this remarkable story, as his brothers are cowering in front of him, afraid of retribution, Joseph breaks down in tears; and says, "*Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?!*"

¹ The whole Joseph story is a real page-turner; found in Genesis chapters 37, and 39-50.

Secondly, Joseph had learned that God has a purpose that overarches our lives. “You intended it to do harm to me; but God intended it for good...to save many lives as he is doing today.” Martin Luther King once said, in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “The long arm of the Universe bends toward Justice.” Joseph could not have known it when his brothers threw him into a deep pit in the desert; he could not have known it when they sold him into slavery; he could not have known it when he was thrown into prison in Egypt on trumped-up charges. But now, with the luxury of hindsight, Joseph sees –if he had not been sold into slavery, he never would have gotten to Egypt, never met Pharaoh, never been placed into the position where he could save his own family and multitudes of others from starvation. All of this did not excuse his brothers’ actions, but it did demonstrate that we do not have to allow those who hurt us to make us “victims.” God has a purpose. “*You meant it for my harm, but God meant it for good...*”

The Joseph story does not trivialize the wrong done; it does not erase history, as if the hurt never happened. “*You intended it to do me harm...*” I know this, Joseph was saying. It was an awful thing you did to me, Joseph was saying. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul calls this “*speaking the truth in love.*” There needs to be truth-telling in forgiveness; there is a place for a well-crafted letter, or a direct expression to the person who hurt us, how we experienced the hurt. Joseph wept as he said it, “*You meant to do me harm.*” I know that. I lived that. But perhaps his tears tell us that, somehow, the bitterness had been neutralized by this overarching sense that God was surrounding these events with His purpose. And especially in that moment when Forgiveness is being given, God is present; you are on Sacred Ground.²

Last week, one of our members helped me think through the implications of Forgiveness in a business context. This is another place where Forgiveness gets complicated; yet as devoted Christians, she and her husband nevertheless seek Christ’s guidance in what to do. “Often in our business,” she wrote, “there are people who just can’t pay their debts. Some honestly try to work out their payments; others we end up forgiving the debt, but not without great stress on us and the business. Does God expect us to forgive the indebtedness *and* the consequences? So far, we have taken the stance to separate forgiveness and consequences. If my child horses around and breaks a precious lamp, I will of course forgive him; but the consequence is still there.” Should the child be given the opportunity to help pay for a new lamp or fix the old one?

Is it right to separate Forgiveness and Consequences? I think so. If we mess up our lives because of bad choices made, God is eager to forgive, eager to restore our relationship with Him, like the Father who runs out to embrace the Prodigal come home. But God does not remove the consequences; we still live with the mess that we have made. The Prodigal still has to face

² An inspiring political application of truth telling in national forgiveness comes out of the horrors of Apartheid in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, mandated by President Nelson Mandela and implemented by Bishop Desmond Tutu. It is described in Bishop Tutu’s book *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Doubleday: New York), 1999.

his elder brother. The wonder of God is that He will help us work through those consequences in a way that can be redeeming, “*For we know that God works all things together for good...*” (Romans 8:28)

Now, I’d like to finish this sermon by inviting us all to close our eyes, bow our heads, and ask the Holy Spirit to give us an answer to this all-important question: “Is there a person in my life I have not forgiven?” It may be a parent, long since gone; or a parent who is very much alive. It could be a spouse sitting next to you; or an ex-spouse from whom you experienced an ugly divorce. It may be a business partner, or a client who has cheated you, or a friend who has hurt you deeply.

With your eyes closed now, I want you to put your hands in your lap, palms up. Now clench them tight like a fist. This is the person you resent so much. Picture Christ on the cross, above you. You look up at Him, as you clench your fists. He looks at you with the gaze of absolute Love. He says, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” You have help as you bring this person before God.

And now, speak back to Jesus, make it a prayer, words something like these: “Dear Jesus, Lover of my soul, You know how angry and bitter I am toward this person. Search me and know my heart.Help me to confess my own sins to you right now, for I know they are many, and only a few am I aware of. Hear my prayer, Lord.....Lord, I pray for this person I resent so much; help me as I pray for Your blessing in his/her life....Great God, I give the judgment to You, for You and You alone are the only wise and righteous judge. Judge me; judge my enemy; and grant us both Your mercy.”

Now, slowly open your fists, very slowly. Let your palms remain upwards. Feel how stiff and hard your hands feel as you try to let go. Feel the relief of having let go. And now, with your palms open and upward, join me again silently in this prayer:

“Lord, would you give me the Spirit of Jesus: where there is hatred, fill me with Love; where there is injury, help me to grant pardon, for truly it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying to our selves, that we are born to new life,³ through Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

³ Words adapted from *The Prayer of St. Francis*.

