

July 1, 2018
7th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Forgiveness”

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Psalm 51

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgement.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;*
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right* spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing* spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,

and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;

if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God* is a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;

rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,

in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;

then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Matthew 5:43-48

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Forgiveness

Corrie ten Boom once said Alex Evans, who happens to be the father of our new member Ginny Kowalski, is a Presbyterian minister who has worked as a police chaplain. This work, he writes, requires him "to be engaged in a big sea of complex thoughts and emotions and actions related to life and death, revenge and forgiveness." He tells the story of a police officer who was killed in the line of duty and whose murderer escaped and was on the loose. As you can imagine, the officers involved in the desperate search for the person who killed one of their colleagues are caught up in unimaginable grief and loss and anger and fear and desire for revenge all of which can render their police work less effective.

One officer talking with Evans described his experience this way: "I was riding around filled with hatred. This criminal had killed one of my best friends. It was going to feel so good to find him and kill him. I was ready. I was focused. I had a mission. But as the hours passed, I realized how I was getting caught up in the rage and loss. I realized I was becoming, in my thinking and feelings, all that the killer was a hateful, murdering person. I realized--'I am different. I have to be different. I am more than that. I cannot be pulled into that death-filled, hate-filled kind of existence.'¹

There are few things in our journeys of faith – few things in life itself, for that matter as complicated as the topic of forgiveness. In my work as a pastor, there is probably no single topic that has raised more questions for people to whom I have ministered and for me.

What do you do when someone hurts you, but they don't think they've done anything wrong?

Can you forgive someone who hasn't repented or apologized?

Is there a sin that is unforgivable because it is just too horrible?

What happens when you have done the work of forgiveness, but you still feel a sense of anger and resentment?

Have you really forgiven someone if you still harbor negative feelings toward them?

These are just a few questions I've gotten on the topic of forgiveness, and I hope you'll forgive me if I don't offer easy answers. In my experience, there are ways we can forgive and become more forgiving, but none of them are easy. Today, we heard two scripture passages that both offer wisdom about the process of forgiveness, wisdom that the police officer intuitively grasped. First, when it comes to forgiveness, if we can't recognize our own need for mercy it will be impossible to show mercy to others. Second, often it is only by tapping into a power greater than ourselves that can forgive someone whose actions have hurt us deeply.

Our psalm today reminds us that the most difficult work of forgiveness is often forgiving ourselves. This psalm is attributed to David, the greatest of Israel's kings, who, despite his great reputation as a warrior and ruler, was as flawed as the rest of us. Thankfully, the Bible records not only some of his most

¹ Rev. Dr. Alexander Evans, "Forgiving from Your Heart," Day1, September 14, 2014. <http://day1.org/6060-forgiving-from-your-heart>

spectacular transgressions but the process of repentance he went through once he was able to admit his own sin – repentance that reveals both his capacity to take responsibility and his ability to recognize God's providence over all things. “Against you God you, alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me...”

This psalm reminds us that, whether we have done wrong or been wronged, we don't just hurt each other, we hurt God, who created and loves each one of us and who is always ready to offer us mercy.

In her poem, “what they did yesterday afternoon,” the Kenyan poet Warsan Shire writes,

they set my aunts house on fire
I cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
I called the boy who use to love me
tried to ‘okay’ my voice
I said hello
he said warsan, what’s wrong, what’s happened?

I've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
I come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.

later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere

everywhere
everywhere.²

When Jesus offers his first sermon to the crowd of people desperate enough that they left everything to follow him, he talks about forgiveness without ever using the word when he instructs them to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Looking at all those people who were hungry and thirsty for meaning and wisdom, he reminds them that the very nature of God's creation reveals that even the people we hate most are beloved children of God, for rain falls on the just and the unjust in exactly the same way, in exactly the same measure.

In this teaching, Jesus seeks to free us from the exhausting practice of calculating, calculating exactly what it takes to forgive someone, calculating precisely how kind we have to be to those who have hurt us, calculating just how much we have to love those with whom we vehemently disagree. Jesus would have us abolish all such distinctions, commanding his followers to love all people without the condition. Which is why it is so important to learn how to be compassionate towards ourselves; for we can never show mercy to our enemies if we can't first recognize and forgive our own sin. But let me say again: there is nothing easy about this, and Jesus acknowledges that forgiveness doesn't happen without work. He names this work, prayer. And what is prayer but a process of taking time away from our unceasing doing and thinking and judging and calculating to try and align our thoughts and feelings and hearts if only for a moment! With God the God who knows more about mercy and forgiveness than we could imagine.

The scholar Dale Bruner reminds us that "Jesus's command [to love and pray for our enemies] is not asking disciples to do anything God is not doing daily, and doing in great profusion through the millennia. *The God of creation is the God who loves enemies.*" When we consider God's love for all the world, we recognize that, as Bruner puts it, "God's maturity is so great that God gives himself in his world as generously to the bad as he does to the good. God's family is asked to be no less fair, no less magnanimous, no less expansive – or, as Jesus puts it, no less mature."³

² <http://amberjkeyser.com/2015/11/warsan-shire/>

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*. Eerdmans, 2007.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he tells his disciples to be perfect, as God is perfect. He's not talking about never making mistakes. The Greek word translated "perfect" here actually refers to timing; it's a word that describes a mature adult compared to an immature child, which means God's perfection is not a perfection of behavior or performance, it is a perfection of mercy and compassion and empathy and whole-heartedness, toward ourselves as well as those we experience deep aversion for, and this kind of perfection, this level of spiritual maturity only comes with time and practice.

Fifteen years after she had divorced her second husband, Catherine learned that he had sexually abused her teenage daughter. At the time of the abuse, Catherine was caught in unhappiness and addiction, and because of her drinking, she had missed all the signs that might have otherwise alerted her to what was going on. When she learned about the abuse, Catherine was consumed by shame and self-hatred. She held herself responsible for what had happened to her daughter, and she was sure she could never forgive herself. Finally, she went to see her priest and ask him what she could do to relieve her misery. After they talked, the priest took her hand and drew a small circle in the center of her palm. "This is what you're experiencing," he said, "the rage and shame and self-hatred and unforgiveness you are feeling, and you have to feel it. But at the same time, try to remember this." As he spoke, he covered her hand with his own, "*this* is God's mercy, and it is limitless, and if you can remember this, you will discover compassion and healing greater than any you have known." Over the months, Catherine would think back to that conversation and feel that priest's hand over hers and know that a loving God was surrounding her with God's compassion and mercy even when she could not feel compassion and mercy for herself. Eventually, after a long time of remembering that priest's words and allowing God's forgiveness to cover her, she was able to forgive herself and, after more time had passed, to forgive even the man who had abused her daughter.⁴

Our world is in desperate need of disciples who love their enemies. I suspect all any of us have to do is read or listen to the news to begin to feel our anger and judgment rise no matter who that anger and judgment is for. After all, no matter what your politics, we can all agree that it's been quite a week. The Supreme Court made some impactful decisions, the crisis continued regarding

⁴ I heard this story (and the two poems in this sermon) on Tara Brach's course "Freeing Yourself from Blame and Resentment," published on the InsightTimer application. www.insighttimer.com

immigrant families, and thousands of people across the country gathered yesterday to protest current policies. Another tragic police shooting took the life of unarmed black youth, and Supreme Court Justice Kennedy announced his retirement. For some, a week like this feels like the end of the world. But it isn't. Consider that, regardless of who had won the last presidential election, half of the country would have felt the world had come to an end when the victor was announced and for every person who groaned this week when Justice Kennedy resigned, another would have groaned at the prospect of a Democratic president choosing his replacement.

God's rain – actual rain as well as the metaphorical rain of God's love and mercy and compassion falls on the just and the unjust, no matter how we define them, no matter which camp we place ourselves in. So the next time we are confronted with anger and judgment for our enemies – even if our worst enemy is ourselves what if we stop and remember David's prayer of repentance and restoration? What if we take time to remember Jesus's command to love our enemies by praying for them? What if we actually sit with our feelings of anger and judgment without trying to change them, and ask God to forgive what we cannot? What if we trust that God does what God promises to do: God showers this world with love and mercy and compassion, God makes a way where there appears to be no way God brings hope from despair and life from death God gives us a capacity for forgiveness beyond what we could ever imagine?

On 9-11 a thirteen-year-old boy named Mattie Stepanek wrote a poem titled, "For Our World."

We need to stop.
Just stop.
Stop for a moment.
Before anybody
Says or does anything
That may hurt anyone else.
We need to be silent.
Just silent.
Silent for a moment.
Before we forever lose
The blessing of songs
That grow in our hearts.

We need to notice.
Just notice.
Notice for a moment.
Before the future slips away
Into ashes and dust of humility.
Stop, be silent, and notice.
In so many ways, we are the same.
Our differences are unique treasures.
We have, we are, a mosaic of gifts
To nurture, to offer, to accept.
We need to be.
Just be.
Be for a moment.
Kind and gentle, innocent and trusting,
Like children and lambs,
Never judging or vengeful
Like the judging and vengeful.
And now, let us pray,
Differently, yet together,
Before there is no earth, no life,
No chance for peace.⁵

Amen.

⁵ <http://www.mattieonline.com/?p=14531>