

## “Forgiveness”

1 John 1:5-10; Jeremiah 31:31-34;  
Matthew 18:21-35

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Do you ever do anything wrong? If none of us ever did anything wrong, there would be no need for forgiveness. Yet, as we have started on this journey, we recognized that the things we say sometimes hurt others, cause brokenness in our relationships with others. If we are truthful with ourselves—1<sup>st</sup> John invites us not to deceive ourselves about that—we have hurts between us. There are struggles. There are ways we have brokenness. There is, in this world, a lot of hurt. That is the truth and we shouldn't deceive ourselves about it. What do we do with that?

Well, if somebody deceives me, I don't particularly like it. I think about that experience of having wrong done to me and think about how the storm clouds of my own feelings begin to take form and shape, begin to guide how I respond. Generally when I feel something wrong has been done to me, my first reaction is to want to get back, get some revenge, get retribution. So I am always taken aback by Romans, Chapter 12, verse 19: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

In the midst of wrong, in the midst of struggle, we are invited not to take revenge, not to take retribution. It's not such a bad thing if I'm the one who has done the wrong. I appreciate that there's not a call to retribution, although it's a little scary to think that it's left to God and what that might mean. But if I feel wronged, it's so hard for me to not want to take that retribution. What do I do with those storm clouds of feelings that I have? I think that we are invited to hear the truth in love. Sometimes the truth is that it hurts and we've been hurt, or we've hurt someone else. There's a world of hurt. It's hard not to get bitter and resentful, holding on to the injustice and to want to punish the wrongdoer. And yet, we spent the morning last week talking about the compassion of Christ. Where does bitterness and resentfulness and the desire to punish fit with compassion, pity, mercy, or grace?

We are invited to have that compassion for the broken relationships we know and see. I think that idea of a broken relationship covers a multitude of sins. Not like other ways we want to cover those, but it describes quite a variety of kinds of sins. Brokenness in a relationship can be defined as anything from a very slight way that we've hurt someone else to the kinds of depths of violence and hurt that we can inflict on each other. It's one of the reasons I find this such a hard topic. We have such a range of things we're talking about—the wrongs, the hurts, the evil, the violence in our world. How do we deal with it? Without compassion it's too easy to just become bitter, resentful, and desirous of revenge.

I think we can have a couple of responses to the wrongs and the hurts. We can simply blame the other for all of those. We can blame other people for the problems we have, the problems of the world, the hurt that we experience. Or we can blame

ourselves. Somehow we're not good enough. It's our problem. We are the problem for it all. To tell the truth, sometimes we do both. We blame the world and at the same time we don't think we're worth the experience of having something right and good. So we can get stuck.

I think Jesus wants us to know that the compassion God offers us is for new life. It's not to be stuck in the bitterness, or the resentfulness, or the desire for revenge. It's not to be stuck in my sins or the sins of others. It is an invitation to forgiveness. The way of forgiveness is a way of restoration rather than punishment. It's a way for the future rather than being stuck in the past. It's a way of the possible instead of being stuck in the impossible. We can't change the past, but forgiveness is an invitation to live into the future.

How do we do that? How do we let go? I found this little phrase: "Love, Value, Able." Most of the time when we struggle with our problems and our hurts, it's because we feel like they have taken us to a place where we are diminished in some way. Sometimes we really are diminished in some way. It can be physical. And yet, sometimes we feel diminished by the way the world tears us down. The thing that's hardest about that is the thought that we are unloved or unlovable. We're not valued. So, the way of letting go has to include something about being loved and being valued.

I can't let go of some of the hurts in my past. I can't let go as long as I let those hurts define me. I can only let go by beginning to recognize what really defines me is the love and value I find in God—a grace that goes beyond whatever has happened to me, whatever my life circumstances.

In the scripture this morning there are several places where we ask God not to remember our problems, our sins, our ways of causing broken relationships. There is a sense in which we think about that as a way forward, and yet I don't think forgiveness really means that we wipe away the past. In the book we used for this summer's sermon series by Adele Calhoun, she says, "Forgiveness is different than pretending everything is fine when you feel stabbed in the heart and trust is down the toilet." Sometimes it feels like forgiveness is exactly that. We try to pretend that we've forgotten. I don't think forgiveness is really forgetting. There's a sense of forgetting. There's a sense of not holding on to something, letting it go, but it's not like we forget that it happened or that there's a problem.

Forgiveness is not saying everything is all right. Sometimes it feels like forgiveness is simply saying, "Oh, you did something wrong? It's okay." Well, no, it's not okay. Wrongs are not okay. Forgiveness does not say that the wrong done is right. That's what's hard about forgiveness. Forgiveness involves change.

When we are forgiven by God, God doesn't say, "I'll forget everything you've done so you can just keep doing it." Forgiveness is like a door. If we take that door, we repent. We start a new life. We do something different. We see the wrong we've done and want to be different than that. Forgiveness is not a pass. Forgiveness is an

opportunity. God's forgiveness, God's grace, is that he loves us in spite of the wrongs we've done and is willing to help us live into a new life—a life full of goodness and grace. Forgiveness is not staying in the wrongdoing. It is not accepting wrongdoing. It's not saying it's okay.

Let me just say that in both Greek and Hebrew, one sense of the word "forgiveness" really means to separate something from something else. So forgiving us of our sins is separating us from our sins. Sometimes we say something like we want to hate the sin and love the sinner. It's a way of getting at that idea that we want to separate the sin from the sinner. We want to separate and be able to love the child of God, but not the wrongdoing.

Forgiveness, I think, is about letting go of the sense that we want to exact retribution and punishment for the wrong done to us. It's letting go of our desire to punish or to force the other to change. Forgiveness is letting go of wanting to force change on the other and giving the other to God. I think it may lead to reconciliation, but forgiving and reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiving is the door, is the possibility, is the recognition that I don't want to hold onto the bitterness and resentment. I want to give over that wrongdoing and the dealing with it to God. What I really want, what God is inviting us to want in loving even our enemies, is that the enemy becomes different. When we forgive, it's the idea that I no longer want to punish, I no longer want retribution, in fact what I want is healing. I want the other to see the wrong they've done, to change their ways, to find the love of God and to become a new person in Christ.

It's not that I think I can do that. It's not that deciding that I'm not going to take out punishment or retribution is going to do that. But it is a release for me from allowing the other to control who I am because I don't depend on the love and value from the one who does the wrong, I depend on the love and value of the one that does the right. The only one that is fully good is God. It is dependence on God that lets me let go of the wrong. By letting go I don't mean to say it's right. By letting go, it's not going to be what's in control of my life.

It may be that we need to contain wrong. As a society, I think we have every right to contain that wrongdoing, to make sure that it's not perpetuated. The broken relationships are not good things. Stealing from people is breaking a relationship. It's not a good thing. It's breaking a trust. We have a right to try to contain and control that and to not let it control our lives, but once the mistake has happened, we also are called, I think, by Christ to see how we can make reparations, not simply punish, but restore; not simply put away but find a way to bring change. That's something I don't think we've done very well in our society. I don't know what the recidivism rate (that is the return rate) of somebody released from jail becoming incarcerated again is, but I'm pretty sure it's pretty high. We need to get beyond punishment to restoration. We certainly would want that for ourselves. I certainly want God to do that for me.

The older I get, the more I recognize things that I've done wrong. I continually am thankful for the grace of God that allows me again to recognize forgiveness and that this is a process. Sometimes we do want forgiveness to simply be a door that we've walked through and it's done. But I know in my life that it's been a series of doors, and I'm not done. I live with some of the wrongs I've done and wish there were a way to solve them, but I can't live in the impossible. I can't go back and change what I've done. I have to live with grace and go into a future of hope based on the love and grace of God.

I've struggled mightily with trying to define forgiveness. The best I can do at the moment is this: Forgiveness is letting go of a desire for retribution or for forcing change on another and is turning the other over to God and hoping the other will turn from their mistakes, wrongdoing, and even evil, and learn to do good through recognizing the love and grace of God and finding new life in Christ. That's a long definition, but the idea is that forgiveness is partly release. It's a release on my part of holding onto a wrong and letting it define me, and thinking instead about what does define me. What defines me is the love of God. It's the grace of God. It's the hope I have through Christ. It is by that I can let go of the wrongs done me and instead hope for change. It doesn't mean that I don't have to contain, that I don't have to deal with the wrongdoing, but it's not what defines me. It is the love of God. As I can let go of the need for retribution, let go of the desire to try to change the other, let go and instead hope that I can give that one to God and that God will work in their life to change them or deal with them appropriately and that they might find new life in Christ.

Forgiveness is separating from sin, separating from wrongs, separating from the mistakes. It is separating and going a new way. It is not a pass for bad behavior, but it is the opportunity to live anew and change. Certainly, God's forgiveness for us, his ability to remove our transgressions as far from us as the east is from the west, is an invitation to new life—a new life that centers around doing what is just, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. Forgiveness is letting go and hoping for new life. When we experience forgiveness, we get a taste of that new life. We get to walk into that new life by the very grace of God. Amen.