

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
February 9, 2014
©2014

The ABC's of Faith: Forgiveness

Micah 7:18-19 18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. 19 He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Mark 11:25 25 "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

A acquaintance of mine, who travels quite a bit, tells the following story about one of those minor mysteries of life. Here's what he has to say:

In preparing for a trip, I put my laptop in its carrying case. In another small pocket, I put the electric connection cord, the [ethernet] cord and the mouse and its cord. I wrap each one separately.... The computer case goes into the overhead compartment or under my seat. No one else ever touches it. Hours later, my flight has arrived, I have ...checked into the hotel and I plan to work on my laptop. I take the laptop out and then unzip the small pocket with the three cords.... The three cords are now... tangled up with one another! It takes me several minutes to untangled them. How did that happen?

I can't answer his question, can you? It's one of those small mysteries of life like socks that start out in pairs at the beginning of their laundry journey but have mysteriously become divorced when you are unloading the dryer, like the fact that your car keys are never where you think you left them but have always quietly wandered somewhere else, like the fact that shoelaces never, ever, ever break at a convenient time.

But that minor mystery of the spontaneously tangling computer cords is an image sometimes, my friend goes on to say, for life itself:

...isn't this the way life goes far too often? It seems we have things pretty well organized...in hand...under control...and all of a sudden out of nowhere, all kinds of things are tangled up! We have no real idea how it happened, but things have gotten out of control: ...messy...confused...complicated. ... [H]ealth concern[s] come... out of nowhere or a relationship suddenly sours or... a pipe breaks or... we get a call from the teacher that our kid's grades are slipping or there are just too many deadlines and not enough hours.... You know what I mean?

Well, yes I do. And I'll bet you do too. Life being "all tangled up" is a pretty good image indeed for how things feel sometimes. And, this morning, as we continue our sermon series on "The ABC's of Faith," it's also a pretty good image for our latest in the alphabet, "Forgiveness." Forgiveness. Depending on the translation you're reading, variations of the word appear almost 150 times in the Bible. Every single Sunday in worship we use the word when we pray The Lord's Prayer and are reminded that Jesus explicitly instructed his followers to both ask for forgiveness and to offer it. In our short scripture from the Gospel of Mark this morning, Jesus says it this way, telling us that when we come to God in prayer for whatever reason, we need to seek to be able to forgive those who have injured us: *"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...."* But sometimes that's a hard thing to both hear and to do, isn't it? And our feelings here are an index of the fact that indeed there are few other words in the Christian vocabulary of faith that may indeed make us feel more "tangled," and confused about what exactly it means and what it asks – and doesn't ask! – of us.

So, this morning, let us see if we can first untangle ourselves a little by reminding ourselves of three points about forgiveness. I shared this in a somewhat different form a number of months ago, but I think they're worth repeating.

First, to forgive is not to forget. That may seem obvious but it's not. For one thing, it's just plain impossible. You can delude yourself that you have forgotten a hurt done to you, and indeed the details and sharpness of the pain do fade, but that hurt will still be there. To claim that it is not gives it a power over you that it need not have. No, to forgive someone is to commit yourself to the best of your ability to not let your future actions be determined by that hurt. In other words, when you forgive, you stop being a victim and you are able to let God be the guide of your life instead of that unacknowledged hurt that has scarred you. Which also means that you forgive someone for the sake of your own restoration and healing as much as for theirs!

Second, forgiveness is not a license for continued abuse. Every clergy person, including me, has encountered women – and on a very few occasions, men – who have been abused by those whom they were in relationship with. Sometimes horribly abused. And there has been too much insidious theology that has said and continues to say to those women “Well, you must forgive him and go back to him and go back to being abused.” No! No! Remember the first point? To forgive is take control back – or, more accurately, to let God once again be the One who is guiding your life and possibilities – and sometimes, sadly but necessarily, that means that forgiveness in such a situation means removing yourself from the relationship.

Third, a hard but true fact about forgiveness is this: you may forgive but that doesn't necessarily mean that the relationship can be healed or restored. Why? Well,

this is where the one forgiven by you must truly recognize the hurt caused, be truly sorry for it, and truly seek to make some sort of reparation for that hurt. Without these moves on the part of the other party, and impaired relationship cannot be healed. The one who hurt you cannot expect to have a renewed relationship with you so long as he or she does not realize or admit to what was done, regret it, and seek to made amends. But that part, again, is simply not up to you.

Part of our feeling “tangled” about forgiveness is indeed that we get confused about these three points. But this morning I also want to add three more points about forgiveness. So, fourth point: part of why forgiveness becomes a difficult, puzzling, tangled thing for us is often because we divorce it from the context within which it is so often found in the Bible – and that is **prayer**. Jesus instructions about forgiveness, both in today’s scripture and in the Lord’s Prayer, are in the context of prayer. And in the gospel of Luke, almost the very last thing he says is also about forgiveness – and it too is in the form of a prayer uttered from the cross: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus’ words and actions remind us that the ability to forgive only comes from God. It is God who can change us in such a way that it is possible to forgive. It is God who offers us newness and hope. Without the power of God, our attempts at forgiveness often simply end up as gestures of resignation – but the wound still festers. If we need to forgive – and surely we all do – one of the ways that we will get ourselves untangled is by seeking a power that is not our own through prayer.

Fifth, I also want you to notice something else about Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness on the cross, for they remind us of something about forgiveness that we should always remember; in the poignant and powerful words of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, “*God*

does not need our prayers. We need them. We need to be able to pray in sincerity and beauty. And the prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody.”

The prayer should not be against somebody, but always for somebody. Does that line convict you? It does me. For sometimes I have used my prayers not as earnest and sincere attempts to seek God’s power to help me forgive, but as a weapon; have you ever done that? Sometimes I have had people’s prayers for forgiveness used as a weapon against me. At a church where I once the pastor a long time ago, a church full of good people who somehow seemed to find themselves enmeshed in perennial conflict, one of the Elders once opened a “prayer meeting” with the line *“Now let us begin our prayers by asking that our pastor would recant and repent of his wrong beliefs that we might be able to forgive him.”* But, as Wiesel reminds us, a prayer for forgiveness that us used as a weapon is not prayer, it’s presumption. A prayer for forgiveness that is offered to let God know whom He needs to especially chastise, is not prayer, it’s pretentiousness. A prayer for forgiveness that is offered in the belief that one is morally superior to the “object” of one’s prayers is not prayer, it’s smug self-satisfaction. How do we avoid these things, though, sinful and earthly creatures that we are?

Well, I think an answer to that may lead us to a final point about forgiveness and that is that prayers for the ability to forgive someone need to always first have the character of confession. A wise seminary professor of mine once said that in every story from the Bible we always inescapably but often unconsciously put ourselves in the role of one of the characters of the story. And, I don’t know about you, but I have to confess that I sometimes put myself in the magnanimous role of God, deigning to

forgive those who “need” my dispensation. Ouch. We are all prone to it. “Father, forgive them.” **Them**. Just as in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, where Jesus tells of the one-hour workers who received the exact same pay as those who worked all day long, and where we too often unconsciously assume ourselves to be one of those workers who labored all day, maybe it would be more honest and more authentic for us to remember that often it is **we** who are “them”! It is **we** who stand in need of forgiveness, not some sort of “they” or “them” whom we think of ourselves as somehow superior to. It is **we** who are often the one-hour-workers and God through Christ miraculously loves us just as lavishly as those who truly labored all the day long. “Father, forgive them.” Jesus’ words convict me and remind me that often “them” is me!

Does any of that make that this notion of “forgiveness” less tangled? Let us recap: Forgiving is not forgetting, for that is just not possible. Forgiving is never license for continued abuse; it’s not a Monopoly card sending someone back to “Go” so that they can again hurt you. Forgiveness without repentance and restitution is not really forgiveness, but neither you nor I can force the person who needs forgiving to do those things. Forgiveness on our parts is only possible when we hold it in the context of prayer and of seeking God’s power to help us be remade and re-born. And praying for forgiveness should never be used as a weapon for the first note of praying for the ability to forgive is to remember that you too have sinned and fallen short.

Another wise seminary professor of Barbara’s and mine once said “Make sure every sermon has, in the end, a proclamation of the Good News of the Gospel.” And that is where we need to end this morning. For the subject of forgiveness is an intense

one and we need to be reminded of the Good News of God's gracious and unconditional love. And this morning there seems to me to be no better scripture than our second one from the prophet Micah, for he expresses well what the Jewish people and we Christians know – or should know! – about who God is even in the midst of hard things. Hear his words again: *“[God] does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. [God] will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”* God delights – did you hear the word? Delights! – in showing forgiveness, delights in helping to make us whole, delights in not allowing our sins to trap us, delights in helping us move forward being hurts done to us that would seek to scar us. That, my friends, is the last and the first word for this and every day: God takes joy and delight in us, loves us always, and will never let us go. I don't know about you, but remembering those things – things that God's people have known for three millennia – lets me get a whole lot less “tangled” – to the glory of God. How about you?