



“A Matter of the Heart”
Preached by Anne Ledbetter
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Scripture – Matthew 18:21-35

18th century poet Alexander Pope penned the memorable verse: “To err is human, to forgive divine;” and life reinforces this lesson that forgiveness is indeed a holy trait, and anything but second nature for us. We tend to hold grudges, keep accounts, and harbor resentments.

In her lovely book *The Pearl is in the Oyster* Marilyn Cram Donahue tells the story of a neighbor who had ritualized her resentment. Whenever a visitor came for a cup of tea or coffee, she would pour the drinks and then reach for an old and battered plastic sugar bowl. Then, apologetically, she would tell her story of the beautiful bone china bowl that her mother had owned, but that her sister had taken when their mother died. She had never forgiven her sister, and had turned her bitterness into a daily routine that kept it fresh and growing.¹

Whereas some people seem to cherish their resentments and cling to their role as victim, most of us simply struggle to let go of the hurt – possibly holding on to it as a reminder not to let down our guard and be vulnerable to injury again.

In today’s passage from Matthew, Jesus proclaims that forgiveness is part and parcel to the life of faith. Why? Because God is intrinsically gracious and ready to forgive. The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly attest, “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Additionally, the apostle Paul continually exhorts the early church to love and forgive one another. To the Ephesians he writes, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” In Colossians we read, “Bear with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” We recoil from that word *must*, don’t we? From about 18 months of age, we develop an independent streak that rebels against being told to do something. Instead, we want to be able to choose it. Today’s scripture passage presents forgiveness as a choice, a difficult choice which God calls us to make over and over and over again.

Peter comes to Jesus asking, “Lord, if a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter is being magnanimous, proposing not three times as allowed in the Jewish tradition, but seven the perfect, whole number. Perhaps he expects to impress Jesus with his generosity. But Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Lest we get excited that there is a maximum number of times we have to forgive our neighbor, or sibling or spouse –Jesus was emphasizing that forgiveness is to be shown continually, perpetually, faithfully. Moreover, our forgiveness of others is related to our forgiveness from God.

To drive home his point, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant, pointing to those who are willing to receive God’s forgiveness but are unwilling to offer it to another. The servant is forgiven an enormous, indeed impossible, debt by the king, and yet is immediately unwilling to forgive a tiny debt owed to him by a fellow servant. Essentially, Jesus indicates that our willingness to extend forgiveness flows from our ability to receive forgiveness.

Some people have taken this teaching to heart. Perhaps you remember the 2006 tragedy in Pennsylvania where a gunman opened fire in an Amish schoolhouse killing five little girls, injuring five others, then turning the gun on himself. As the story unfolded our nation was astonished to hear that leaders of the Amish community immediately went to the gunman’s widow and expressed their forgiveness toward her husband and their care for her and her family. In the book *Amish Grace*, the authors, two area seminary professors, explain that the community’s swift impulse to forgive arose from their daily practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” In their hearts they understood that their ability to forgive is related to their own need for God’s forgiveness. How could they do anything **but** forgive when they themselves rely on God’s forgiveness?

Jesus teaches that forgiveness is critical to God’s realm. However, like Peter, we want to place some reasonable limits on our forgiveness – how often is forgiveness in order, whom should we forgive, and under what conditions. We weigh various offenses against us, and decide which ones are forgivable, which ones God would truly have us forgive. Can a woman forgive her parents for sending her brothers to college but ignoring her desire for an education? Should a man forgive his colleague who stole his design? Can a young person forgive a teacher who abused her? Should a husband or wife forgive their partner of infidelity? Are we really supposed to forgive our enemy?

Two years ago in reporting on the difficulty of eye witness testimony, 60 Minutes highlighted the story of Jennifer Thompson and Ronald Cotton. In 1984 Cotton was convicted of raping Thompson based on her identification of him as her assailant. Eleven years later, DNA evidence cleared Cotton proving that another man had committed the crime. When Thompson realized her dreadful mistake which had taken 11 years of this man’s life, she was overcome with remorse and asked to meet Cotton in a local church. Thompson recounted the scene this way, "I started to cry immediately. And I looked at him, and I said, ‘Ron, if I spent every second of every minute of every hour for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn’t come close to how my heart feels. I’m so sorry.’ And Ronald just leaned down, he took my hands, looked at me, and said, ‘I forgive you.’” Explaining his feelings, Cotton said, "I told her,

‘Jennifer, I forgive you. I don’t want you to look over your shoulder. I just want us to be happy and move on in life,’ⁱⁱⁱ It’s a powerful story.

And yet, and yet Jennifer Thompson confessed her terrible wrong to Ronald Cotton, and asked for forgiveness. On the other hand, we can’t forgive someone who does not admit their transgression. God could not expect *that* of us!

Both Jesus and Paul tell us to forgive our enemy, to pray for them and act kindly toward them, leaving vengeance for God. Most of us have a hard time living this out, and certainly we fail to do this as a nation. But consider Louie Zamperini whose story Laura Hillenbrand tells in her current bestseller *Unbroken*. Zamperini was a bombardier in WWII when his plane went down on a search and rescue mission over the Pacific. Surviving on a life raft for 47 days through sheer ingenuity and raw grit, Zamperini was finally picked up by the Japanese Navy. He was sent to a POW camp for Allied prisoners, and was regularly targeted and tortured by Sergeant Watanabee, a ruthless man whom the prisoners named The Bird. Eventually the sergeant was re-assigned, and months later Zamperini found himself transferred to the camp where his nemesis served as Commander. The Bird sadistically, atrociously, and repeatedly abused Zamperini and others, and escaped into hiding at the end of the war. Finally liberated by Allied Troops, Zamperini returned a hero, but was plagued by post traumatic stress and haunted by nightmares of his abuser. After marrying and fathering a daughter, Zamperini teetered on the brink of self-destruction with alcohol when he experienced God’s saving grace at a Billy Graham crusade. He turned his life around – throwing away the alcohol and pursuing a life devoted to helping others. Zamperini traveled back to Japan, and asked to meet with the guards who had worked at his camp, and were now imprisoned. Seeing the fear and distress in their eyes, Zamperini simply and sincerely spoke forgiveness to them. In 1998 when he was invited to carry the Olympic torch for a leg of the ceremony in Nagano, Japan, Louie learned that The Bird was still alive – now a wealthy businessman. Zamperini tried to meet with his former enemy, but Watanabee refused. So Louie wrote him a letter expressing his forgiveness of Watanabee’s abuse, and sharing the healing love he had found in Christ. He never heard from Watanabee, but his decision to forgive freed Louie from the fear and hatred which had consumed his life after the war.

I do not know about you, but stories like this of people forgiving their enemies of horrendous crimes shame me when I consider the resentments I have harbored – not over a sugar bowl perhaps, but over a callous betrayal or a destructive lie. People who choose to forgive understand that forgiveness opens the door for healing and restoration, which is why forgiveness is God’s way.

Do you know that the Amish community in Nickel Mines, PA, tore down the school where that horrible shooting took place? They have built another one, and named it New Hope School. That is what forgiveness does – it prepares us for healing and new life.

In today’s last verse Jesus warns us that we must forgive our sister or brother in our heart – not just with lip service, but with sincere feeling. Why? Because forgiveness is a matter of the heart.

Unless we let go of resentment, we cannot experience reconciliation.
Until we turn away from anger, we cannot receive peace.
Unless we purge the toxic bitterness from our hearts,
 we will not truly taste the sweetness of God's grace.
Only by rejecting the role of victim, may we become victors,
 free to live by God's unconquerable love and to join God in the healing the world.

ⁱ As related by John van de Laar, "The Injustice of Limitless Forgiveness" September 5, 2011.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.allaboutrace.com/2009/03/12/wrongly-convicted-man-teams-up-with-accuser-is-forgiveness-controversial/>