



**"Must I Forgive?"**

**Scripture – Luke 7:27-38**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, February 20, 2022**

A young mother slowly spills out her story to a counselor at the shelter for women. Earlier she packed up her young son and came to the safe haven. She grimaces in pain with each breath. The counselor suspects a broken rib. The woman explains that this is not the first time her husband has struck her. He has verbally and physically abused her for more than two years. She says, "It began when our son was just a few months old. My husband is under a great deal of pressure at work and our son is not as quiet as my husband would like him to be. Sometimes he cries, and my husband explodes. He says it's my fault because I don't know how to control our little boy."

The counselor inquires, "Have you ever talked to anyone about this?" The woman shakes her head, no. She tells the counselor that each time after he loses his temper, he says he's really sorry and he begs her to forgive him. In the past, she has always forgiven him, but now she questions whether that is the right thing to do.

Today's gospel reading is one of the extreme teachings of Jesus that sets the bar so implausibly high that we feel doomed to fail. He says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Does this mean the abused woman should submit to being a punching bag? Does Jesus grant a free pass to bullies and people with no conscience?

When Jesus calls on us to love our enemies he is well aware that what he expects is a bit *outrageous*. It is not natural human behavior to respond to hate with love. Our instinct is to retaliate. If you hurt me, you will pay for it. We are often motivated by revenge which is not the wisest basis on which to act. Revenge prompts us to answer a slap with a slug. The hope is that the forceful response will stop the aggression. The danger is that it will escalate the conflict.

As we sit here this morning, Russia has orchestrated a massive build-up of troops on the border of Ukraine and is threatening to invade. If the global community signals there will be no consequence to an attack, Soviet troops will overrun Ukraine and inflict immense human misery. I cannot believe that these words of Jesus call on us to respond to every act of evil with forgiveness.

Jesus never advocated that we open the door to injustice. He and the Jewish prophets before him called for "justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Further, Jesus was deeply

empathetic to suffering. So when we attempt to understand what Jesus means by forgiveness it cannot mean allowing injustice to increase or hardship to spread.

Jesus talked about sin because he knew that we humans are too often motivated by destructive tendencies – anger, envy, greed, lust, and the like. Left unchecked, these vices will destroy. So, Jesus wants us to set our sights on virtues that can lead to just and harmonious relations.

The Scriptures highlight the compassion and mercy of God. Despite the wrongs we perpetrate, God longs to forgive us. In today's passage, Jesus commands us to do likewise and in the Lord's Prayer we pray each Sunday, "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*"

However, our life experience not only demonstrates how difficult forgiveness can be, it also prompts us to question whether forgiveness is always the right path to take.

Before I say another word about forgiveness, I want to acknowledge that I am a very fortunate person. None of my children have been kidnapped or murdered. No one in my family will be struck down by the Taliban. Suspicious eyes will not follow me because of the color of my skin. When I speak of forgiveness, I am aware that although I have experienced some tough blows, I speak from a privileged position.

Perhaps it is best to begin by sharing my thoughts on what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness does not call on us to breeze over the pain that people inflict on one another. While the Scriptures teach us that God is merciful, they also teach us that God opposes sin. Anything we say about forgiveness will be shallow if we attempt to minimize suffering. Human beings do unspeakable things to one another, and so talk of forgiveness can be an offense against victims of injustice if we attempt to minimize the abhorrent nature of vile deeds.

While Christianity dreams of a world where all are treated with respect and dignity, and where all are cared for and live in peace, it does not turn its head from darkness and divisiveness. Christianity takes sin and evil seriously. Sin not only wounds, but destroys. And sin can have far-reaching consequences that echo down the ages. The sins of the ancestors can be visited upon the children. Indeed, the sins of slavery continue to inflict suffering.

Forgiveness does not mean you must trust the person who hurt you. Some people feign remorse to persuade their victim to forgive. However, you may forgive someone for the harm he inflicted on you not because you think the person is truly sorry and amended his ways, but rather to free yourself from the anger that festers within you. However, it does not necessarily follow that you will make yourself vulnerable to being hurt by that person again. The abused woman may forgive her husband, but sever the relationship and keep her distance from him.

Forgiveness does not mean there are no consequences to harmful behavior. A person who committed a crime may genuinely feel remorse and promise to never break the law again, but that does not mean he should not be punished.

Forgiving someone does not imply excusing their actions. Jesus does not want us to condone unscrupulous behavior. He does not declare that we should ignore abuse. He is talking about showing the world a better way than revenge. Forgiveness has the potential of transforming destructive behavior to something life-enhancing.

I suspect that for most of us, our relationships are based on a brew of common sense, cordial cooperation, and self-interest. We practice a mutual give and take, and we try to strike a balance that is more or less fair. However, Jesus expects his followers to go beyond a reciprocal arrangement.

G. B. Caird was a New Testament scholar who taught at the University of Oxford. Commenting on these challenging words of Jesus, he said, "The Christian ethic is Ethics Part II. Other systems distinguish what is right from what is wrong: Jesus distinguishes what is good from what is merely right, and urges his disciples not to be content with the lower standard. Duty is not enough. Duty obeys the rules, but love grasps opportunities. Duty acts under constraint, love is gracious. Duty expects to be recompensed or at least recognized, love expects nothing in return. To love like that is to be a child of God."<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is a compassionate action toward someone whom we might justifiably say does not deserve it. But forgiveness is not only directed at the one who caused the pain, it also helps the victim. If we have been hurt by someone, forgiveness helps us release the pain so that we can put it in the past and move forward. When we forgive someone who has hurt us, even if they will not confess their wrong, the memories that haunt us can "wither away like plants without water."<sup>2</sup>

When I meet with couples who are preparing to marry, I remind them that forgiveness is essential to building a solid and vibrant marriage. No one is perfect and if you live with someone long enough, he/she will not only irritate you with annoying habits, but eventually will do something that will hurt you. You will feel totally justified in holding it over them and striking back, but you can pause and contemplate whether you want your dispute to escalate into a war or if you want to choose the path of forgiveness.

While forgiveness cannot change what happened in the past, it may alter how the past impacts the present and the future. We can cling to the past in a way that leads to despair or we can forgive the past in a way that leads to hope.

How do you react when someone hurts you? Do you try to figure out some clever way to make them pay for it? Do you try to make them feel guilty? Or can you speak honestly to them about the way they have harmed you while leaving open a path that can lead to reconciliation?

Frederick Buechner says that when we forgive someone who has harmed us we say, "You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you to be my friend."<sup>3</sup>

There are times when people confess they have hurt us, but now they seek to repair the breach they created. They ask us to forgive what they did. We can let the hurt fester and declare that our relationship is irreparably harmed and nothing can heal the pain and brokenness. Or, if the remorse is genuine, we can choose to forgive the person and agree to rebuild the relationship. What makes following Jesus so blasted hard is that he calls on us to forgive even when the damage cannot be undone and it is impossible to set everything right. He urges us to let go of the desire to punish, to refuse to allow a past event to dictate our life, and to free ourselves and the offender to live in the present and to lean into a new future.

A colleague tells about his friend who "grew up with a mother who had her own demons. She was, on the one hand, gracious and charismatic. But because of the mysteries of brain chemistry, she could also be harsh, even violent. He remembers often being slapped across his face for no discernable reason. As life has it, children

sometimes end up parenting their parents. His mother developed dementia. In the last seasons of his mother's life, he visited her at a retirement home. One day she asked, 'Son, did I ever strike you?'"

"Yes... yes, you were brutal. You have left me with pain that I have yet to shake. Your anger stalks me in my dreams." That is what he could have said. But instead, he said, 'Mother, I have no memory of that.'"<sup>4</sup>

Like most pastors, Debie Thomas struggles to make sense of this teaching of Jesus to love your enemy, to do good to those who hate you, and to forgive those who hurt you. She offers an image that I find helpful. She wants us to picture forgiveness not as "an escalator; but a spiral staircase. We circle, circle, and circle again, trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we can't tell if we've ascended at all; we keep seeing the same, broken landscape. But ever so slowly, our perspective can change. Ever so slowly, the ground of our pain can fall away. Ever so slowly, we can rise."<sup>5</sup>

Forgiving someone may be the most difficult thing we ever attempt. It may also be the most healing thing we ever accomplish.

The expectations of Jesus are incredibly demanding. But how else could it be? Otherwise, our aspirations would be nothing out of the ordinary, we would be too easily satisfied, and we would not feel the divine tug to do better and to be more like Jesus.

#### NOTES

1. G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 104.
2. Miroslav Volf, "Letting Go: The Final Miracle of Forgiveness," in *Christian Century*, December 12, 2006, p.31.
3. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p.79.
4. Tom Are, "Let it Go," May 16, 2021.
5. Debie Thomas, "The Work of Forgiveness," February 13, 2022.