

FORGIVENESS—THE PATH OF UNDERSTANDING

(03/04/18)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 18:21-22
Luke 17:3-4; 23:32-34

“Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.’”
(Luke 23:34)

This Lenten season we are considering passages of scripture that have to do with the matter of forgiveness.

We begin by acknowledging our sinfulness, the many ways we “fall short of the glory of God,” and consequently our need for forgiveness. The experience of being forgiven, of feeling forgiven is a freeing, liberating experience. It enables us to relate to God out of love and gratitude rather than guilt and fear. The experience of offering forgiveness to others, to those who have hurt or wronged us is also a liberating experience. By removing the resentment that chokes off all other feelings, it enables us to relate to the other person in compassion and love.

Jesus tells us to repent and seek forgiveness when we hurt others in ways that are not helpful to them. This is the case whether the wound was inflicted intentionally or unintentionally. We need to confess our sin and ask not only God’s forgiveness but also the forgiveness of those we have wronged. This is why we join in both a communal and a personal prayer of confession in our celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “sin” means missing the mark. Sin leads or drags us off course, off center. It separates or alienates us from our brothers and sisters, from the deepest parts of ourselves, and from that God who is the ground of all being. I find it interesting that the sacrament that was formerly known as the Sacrament of Confession in the Roman Catholic Church is now known as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This indicates that the primary dynamic is not about sin and forgiveness but about alienation and reconciliation. When we confess our sin we are attempting to reconcile, to heal a broken relationship.

What Jesus said in his response to Peter also applies to us. We need to forgive others. We need to be generous and charitable in our forgiveness. A need or desire for justice can lock us into the past; it can keep alive the memory of past hurts. Simon Wiesenthal, the concentration camp survivor and Nazi war criminal hunter, once raised the question of whether there are any sins that could not and should not be forgiven. I think Jesus would say no, there are no sins that

are unforgivable, that can and should not be forgiven. This is because, in the eyes of God, love and reconciliation are more important and more powerful than justice and revenge.

Note that in his conversation with Jesus Peter indicates that his brother has not offended once but presumably many times and has repeatedly asked for forgiveness. Aside from the matter of continually offending and apologizing, which can get somewhat wearing, this raises an interesting question. We know we should forgive a person who asks us for forgiveness. But what if the person does not really repent and change his/her ways? Should we still forgive? The thief on the cross who repents is forgiven and welcomed into paradise; the other is not.

More often than not, people who have hurt us never even acknowledge what they have done. Many people have suffered deeply at the hands of their parents. The hurts from one's parents are especially deep because we expect our parents to support and love us. When they violate our trust we experience it as a betrayal. Perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, mental illness, or unenlightened approaches to parenting, some parents have inflicted tremendous damage on their children. They have abused their children physically, sexually, verbally, emotionally, and even spiritually. The problem is that when the child is finally able to push past his/her denial and acknowledge what has happened, the offending parent may be dead—and has died without ever expressing remorse.

Can we forgive those who have hurt or wronged us even if they don't know what they did, don't admit it, and don't take responsibility for it? *The question is not whether we can, but what happens to us if we can't.* If we can't let go of the hurt and the desire for revenge, if we can't let go of our victim stance, the anger within us works like a slow and steady poison. To forgive is to let this go, not only for the sake of the other person and the relationship, but also and perhaps especially for ourselves. As the Buddhists tell us, *forgiveness is finally letting go of all hope for a better past.* When we do this, we become free to live and love in the present.

Jesus tells us we should forgive. We should forgive someone who repents not seven times but seventy times seven, even though we are probably tired of having the person hurt us time and time again. Jesus tells us we should even forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness. This is easier said than done. What is the process of forgiveness, the process that might give rise to that feeling of inner peace for which we long?

This morning I would like us to think about what it means to understand the other person and how it impacts the matter of forgiveness. At our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration

Reading Group this past week we explored just this matter, specifically in relation to the young man who killed seventeen people in a terrorist attack in Parkland, Florida.

Years ago I discovered a scale on a personality inventory that speaks to this dynamic. The scale measures our need, desire, or tendency to engage in intraception. Intraception is the process of identifying the psychological dynamics that underlie a person's behavior.

We don't have to be psychologically sophisticated to do this. For example, someone who comes across as an arrogant know-it-all may be suffering from low self-esteem; they compensate for their feelings of inferiority by attempting to act and thus feel superior. Once we understand this, it is easier to accept and perhaps even feel sorry for this person, especially when the compensatory behavior drives away the very people they are trying to impress. We still might not want to drive across the country with them in a car with no radio, but we can at least feel and show a little compassion.

In our Tuesday study group we read a passage from the fourteenth-century mystical text entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In Chapter XXIX the anonymous author, a Christian monk, tells us "no one should judge another here in this life neither for the good nor the evil that that person does. *Only deeds may properly be judged but not the person, whether good or evil.*" This reminded us of Jesus' admonition to "judge not, that you may not be judged" and the old Baptist directive to "hate the sin, but love the sinner."

Is it possible to be sickened at heart not only by the Parkland atrocity but also the other school, church, and concert shootings, the terrorist bombings around the world without hating the persons who perpetrated these acts of violence? Is it possible for us not to judge the person, but to judge the person's actions? Is this what we are called to do as Christians?

Actions like these do not happen out of the blue. As we know, there is always a history. There is often a history of early childhood loss, a history of abuse or neglect, a history of being bullied and feeling powerless to defend oneself. There may even be problems that began *in utero*, e.g., from the effects of a parent's drug abuse on the embryonic brain. There may be signs of a serious mental illness that went unrecognized and/or untreated. We will never know the whole history, that which makes the atrocity understandable, but we know that there is a history.

A fundamental tenet of psychodynamic psychotherapy is that all behavior is meaningful. If it doesn't make sense rationally or consciously, it has to make sense unconsciously. On one level or another it does make sense. This, by the way, doesn't excuse the behavior. We can still

judge the way the person dealt with his/her anger or psychological problems. We may need to lock the person away to protect innocent people from being harmed by him. We may or may not be able to rehabilitate him, but we don't have to hate him.

If we engage in intraception we will try to discover the psychological dynamics that lie behind and give rise to a terrorist's actions. This person's behavior has to make sense on some level, just as our own sinful acts, the way we have hurt others makes sense on some level. How many times have we hurt others or have we been hurt out of ignorance and weakness? I suspect this has been the case many, many times. When we remember this, it is easier to forgive the other person or to forgive oneself. The anger toward the other begins to fade, and our guilt begins to dissolve.

The people who nailed Jesus to the cross did not ask him for forgiveness. Jesus forgave them anyway. He realized they were acting out of weakness, out of a distorted value system, out of fear. In his last moments on earth, Jesus did not hate them; he prayed for them. He said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

In the quiet of our communion service this morning, bring to mind and then bring to God some example of a past hurt that is still alive within you, something which you need to let go. If it is a hurt that has been inflicted on you by another person, try to understand what might have caused the person to act the way he/she did. When you look closely, I bet you'll find hurt, pain, ignorance, and especially fear. I bet you'll find weakness. And how can we harbor hatred toward someone who acts out of fear or weakness? If it a hurt that you have inflicted, own what you have done, repent, and if possible ask for forgiveness.

God is working for healing in us and in our relationships. God is working to free us from the power of past wounds, from our self-righteous resentments, that we might live and love in the present. God is calling us to forgive, even when the person who wronged us is so clueless or self-centered that he/she will never ask for forgiveness.

Forgive them anyway--for them, but even more importantly for you.

*A communion meditation offered by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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