

“The Transformative Power of Forgiveness”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Luke 6:27-38

The gospel message today gives us lots of advice from Jesus, and each saying could be a sermon in and of itself. But the Genesis passage points us towards this line of Jesus’ speech: ³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

When we meet Joseph today, we witness him offering a generous forgiveness to his brothers. These brothers are the ones who, years ago, when they saw their younger brother Joseph parading around in a robe their father had made especially for him, had a fit of jealousy; they threw him into a pit, then sold him off as a slave to Egypt. They dipped their brother’s robe in goat’s blood and presented it to their father Jacob, who wept believing his favorite son had been killed.

Turns out, in Egypt Joseph actually prospered. He had powerful, prophetic dreams that led him from a jail cell to being the second in command to the Pharaoh, in charge of the entire wealth of the land. In those years, his brothers back home suffered under a famine that had come to Canaan. So they traveled to Egypt and humbly asked the Pharaoh’s advisor-- Joseph, their brother-- for mercy. Although they did not recognize their brother, Joseph recognized them, and offered them a generous and loving forgiveness: “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... and to keep alive for you many survivors.”

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! Joseph’s brothers did not deserve the forgiveness Joseph granted them. And yet, with the truth of the brothers’ harmful actions exposed between them, forgiveness is exactly what Joseph gave.

We can see in Joseph a joy and freedom he feels after he shares forgiveness. Bitterness does not own him. He is no longer the victim of his brothers’ betrayal. Looking back, he can even see God’s hand in the place where he has arrived-- able to offer salvation to his starving family in the form of food that allows the generations from Abraham to continue.

“Forgive, and you will be forgiven,” Jesus said in his Sermon on the Plain, which we are continuing from last week. Jesus must have known something about the transformative power of forgiveness.

In my former church, there was a boy in my youth group who came out as gay when he was in the seventh grade. He had the benefit of a family and church that loved and supported him, so he grew into a confident, happy kid. His freshman year of high school, he spent a year studying abroad in Italy. He was not out at his new school or to his host family, a quiet, older couple who had no kids. But somehow, some kids had caught on. One day when he was walking home from school, some older boys came up from behind him, yelling gay slurs. They grabbed him from behind, and one of them snubbed out his cigarette on the back of Jonathan’s neck. Now, this was a small town in Sardinia. Everyone knew everyone. Jonathan was devastated, and even considered going home. When his host parents heard what had happened, they found the boys who had done this to Jonathan. Imagine what they did to them! That’s right, they had them over for dinner. You see, the Mediterranean code of hospitality is still quite strong in this small, Italian village. “You hurt our son,” the host parents accused, staring into the eyes of these boys as they broke bread together. “That means you have hurt us.” As Jonathan describes it, the boys shrank in their seats. You see, the gracious act of hospitality put the enemy in a vulnerable position: in accepting their gifts of food and warmth, they became indebted to this family, and their son. The accountability, learning, and forgiveness that happened over that meal, while Jonathan’s host parents ensured he would be safe enough to share his story, not only transformed Jonathan’s experience so he would be safe in that village the rest of the year; it also transformed the village itself, into a place that had greater understanding and value for human diversity.

Forgiveness is a practice we try to cultivate in our family. When Chris and I fight, we both know that the quality of our marriage suffers if we do not get to the point where one person says I am sorry, and the other says “I forgive you.” Sometimes those words do not get exchanged on the same day as the fight, but we know we have to get to that point if we are to value our relationship, and that our child hears those words too. Likewise, we help our daughter work through the hurts she experiences through loved ones, both friends and family. A few years ago, when younger cousin was in a pushing and biting phase and his parents would force an apology from his stubborn lips. My daughter would tearfully and dutifully respond, “It’s okay, I forgive you.” We got her to consider saying instead, “I forgive you, but don’t do it again.” And when he did it again, we then gave her permission to tell him, “I forgive you, but next time you do it I will push

back.” That happened once, and it seems that after that he stopped pushing and biting her.

We want our daughter to understand that forgiveness does not have to require that you put yourself in harm’s way. Maybe before we can teach forgiveness, we have to teach what forgiveness is *not*. “Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness isn’t pretending that an offense doesn’t matter, or that a wound doesn’t hurt. Forgiveness isn’t acting as if things don’t have to change, or allowing ourselves to be abused and mistreated because ‘God wants us to forgive and forget,’ or assuming that God isn’t interested in justice. Forgiveness isn’t the same thing as healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn’t possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even if we’ve forgiven them” (Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus* blog).

One question worth asking when someone has harmed you is this: “What do you need for your healing?” Do you need a bandaid, or do you need to expose the wound to the air so that it can heal? Another way of asking the question is “what do you need to feel free from the pain caused unto you?” Sometimes, it takes time before forgiveness can happen. Time allows perspective: emotions lose their intensity, a bigger picture emerges, and we are no longer in reactive mode. Have you ever known a war veteran who would not or could not talk about his or her experiences in the years immediately following the war? I heard somewhere that it takes 20-30 years before a communal trauma can be adequately processed. Even when forgiveness cannot happen overnight, offering or asking forgiveness can often allow the air to reach our wounds and bring us through the last steps of healing.

In his class called “God and Us,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu shared with my class of first-year seminarians his reflections on years struggling against the apartheid system in South Africa. Many victims who were killed during that time were his close friends and loved ones. And yet, he insisted that there would be no future for his country without forgiveness. For him, two important pieces necessary for forgiveness were **truth-telling**, and also **restitution**-- meaning addressing the question, “what within my power can I do to help right this wrong I have participated in?” It was very controversial that South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process offered criminal immunity to people who came forward to share the truth of what had happened. But Tutu and other leaders recognized that without this requirement, too many stories would be buried in the interests of protecting privilege, and the wounds and traumas of a nation would never have their chance to heal. He spoke of those who “refus[ed] to be consumed by

bitterness and hatred, willing to meet with those who have violated their persons and their rights, willing to meet in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, eager only to know the truth, to know the perpetrator so that they could forgive them.” Tutu and those involved in the TRC operated on faith that “Forgiveness will follow confessions and healing will happen, and so contribute to national unity and reconciliation.”¹ Having once been imprisoned into townships and poverty, Tutu recognized that his people cannot be free if they are still imprisoned by their bitterness and anger.

Forgiveness is not easy. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who dared to defy Hitler at the cost of his own life, said this: “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... grace without the Cross...” is a “cheap grace” which Christians should never allow.

So another way to get into the habit of forgiveness is to seek and receive forgiveness yourself. When someone suggests that you have done something hurtful, do not be so quick to defend yourself and insist why your accuser is wrong. I see it happen all the time with white people, and I have been guilty of this myself, when we are accused of saying something racist, whether intentionally or not. The knee-jerk reaction of many people who do not want to think of themselves as racist is to correct their accuser, telling them they are misinterpreting what they have heard, and how they are wrong about you, how you don’t see color, and you’re not one of the bad guys. In her book *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Robin DiAngelo examines this tendency in white people. I was socialized in a culture where there was and is racism all around me. As I watch the hot mess of Virginia’s governor who wore blackface in a grad school party, I am reminded that I went to church with people who did things like that and worse; they taught my Sunday School classes and one was my youth group president. I really need God’s help, and the testimonies of people who have been hurt by racism, to help me tease out the racism I was taught, for it was also wrapped up in the teachings of God’s love.

Jesus said, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” When I hear this verse, the line from the Lord’s Prayer also rings in my ears: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” In order to know the power of forgiveness, we must seek forgiveness ourselves and experience the grace that comes when such a gift is offered. As we seek forgiveness, we try to listen and hear how our actions and inaction have hurt someone else. Ask them, if it is appropriate, “Is there anything I can do to help to make this right again?”

¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* New York: Harper Collins, 1997, p. 120

and if the answer is yes, then do it. This humble posture of being on the other side of the forgiveness fence can help us to be more gracious when it is our turn to forgive. Know that you may ask forgiveness, but you cannot demand forgiveness.

Remembering that Luke was written decades after Jesus' actual death, consider that we have two versions of Jesus speaking to us in these verses. The first is the Jesus in the historical moment who probably did preach this sermon on a mountain, or a plain, or both. The second version is the Jesus who has already been betrayed, sold out to the Roman authorities, and executed by crucifixion and come back to us. He is also the Jesus who experienced resurrection from those experiences and knew life again. This Jesus is the one who is able to show us his exposed wounds and tell us: these did not have the last words for my life and my witness. Look, there is more: my wounds alone will not define me, but what God draws out of these wounds still has life to give. May it be so for us too. Amen.