
As we forgive those ...
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 18: 21-35 and Luke 23:26-49

The texts we just read from Luke and from Matthew are likely familiar texts to all of us. The words are so well known. I'm not sure if those texts are usually placed together, but they seemed appropriate to me today because they both touch on the issue of forgiveness. This – being Good Friday – you might expect a sermon about forgiveness. In particular, you might expect a sermon about the classic Christian theology that Jesus's death on the cross is a critical element in our own forgiveness. In that context, “forgiveness” is something that we hope to receive – from God.

But today, I want to look at forgiveness in the other sense. To consider forgiveness not only as something we receive, but as something that we give to others. Because that message is also in our texts for today. Forgiveness is not just something to receive. Deep forgiveness has to flow in both directions. We must accept forgiveness and we must offer forgiveness. To quote Jesus, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”.

In Luke, Jesus forgave the people who were executing him. And in Matthew, Jesus reminds us that forgiveness is something we have to make a frequent habit of - almost like it's a lifestyle decision we make. Jesus preaches forgiveness and Jesus models forgiveness for us. What more do we need? I'm tempted to stop talking right now.

But of course - we all know it is not that simple. I'm sure that we can all think of places in our own lives where forgiveness is not a simple matter. Even with people we love, forgiveness can be a bit complicated. Forgiveness is hard work.

I'm reminded of the story of the woman who had a pet parrot. Although she took good care of the parrot, the parrot constantly acted in a mean way to the woman. The

parrot insulted the woman constantly, and every time she tried to pick the parrot up, it would peck at her arm, sometimes even drawing blood. One day she got fed up with the parrot and as it was insulting her she picked it up and carried it across the room, all the while the parrot was insulting her and pecking her arm. The woman got into the kitchen, opened the freezer door, threw the parrot inside the freezer and quickly closed the door. Then the parrot started to really scream - but after about 5 seconds the parrot went totally quiet.

The woman thought - "On no - I killed it" - so she quickly threw the door open again. But the parrot just stared at her. The woman picked up the parrot and the parrot quickly said, "I'm very sorry. I apologize for my constant bad behaviour. I promise that from now on I'll be a good parrot. "Well Ok", the woman said. "I accept your apology". "Thank you", the parrot said. And then the parrot said, "Can I just ask one question?" The woman said, "Of course". And the parrot - pointing to the freezer - said, "What did that chicken do to you?"

I love that story. But I often wonder - I mean if the story was true I would wonder - did the parrot actually feel sorry for its actions, or did it just feel bullied into its confession by the sight of frozen poultry? And did the woman actually forgive the parrot, or did the woman just take the offer of peace on any terms?

I'm over-analyzing the story, of course, but I do believe that we as a society have trouble understanding real forgiveness. Many of us have been permanently scared by stories such as "Love Story", which preach that "love means never having to say you're sorry". I grew up thinking that the opposite was true - that if you loved someone you would not hesitate to say that you were sorry, and you might even have to do it frequently. This is one of the few places where I agree with John Lennon who said, "Love means having to say you're sorry every fifteen minutes".

Or think of the story of the child who prays to God for a new bicycle. But when the child's parent learns about it, the parent tells the child that God doesn't work that way. But the child knows that God is the source of forgiveness. So instead of praying for a bicycle, the child steals a bicycle and prays to God for forgiveness.

Or consider the familiar sign in a convenience store that simply states: “Check cashing policy: to err is human, to forgive is \$25.”

It’s no wonder that we as a society don’t always know how to forgive.

In Matthew, Jesus talks about forgiveness. But in fact, the story in Matthew is about very expensive forgiveness. The story contrasts two opportunities for forgiveness. In the first part of the story, a debt of ten thousand talents is at stake. In the second part of the story, a debt of only 100 dinarii is at stake. I don't have any dinarii myself, but I believe that at that time, 1 talent was worth 6000 dinarii. If so, then the larger debt is 600,000 times larger than the smaller debt. So, in today's terms, the first slave was forgiven a debt of 1 million dollars, and then refused to cancel a debt worth a single cup of coffee. And that’s a regular coffee at Tim Hortons, not a fancy mocha-frapachino or anything like that!

The forgiveness in question is expensive. It is not only expensive in terms of the cost, it is also expensive because that forgiveness is expected not only once, but many times - over and over. Depending on what translation of the Bible you are using, the limit for forgiveness is either 70 times 7, or 70 plus 7 - or perhaps it’s even unlimited. The number of times that Jesus expects us to forgive others varies with translation - but it is always a large number. Jesus is a long way here from the philosophy of 3 strikes.

And what about Jesus's words. Presumably spoken while hanging on a cross. Hands and feet punctured, fresh wounds from the various beatings that he received since his arrest. In pain. In a state to be pitied. And Jesus says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Jesus offered forgiveness to the people who were torturing him. That sounds like very expensive forgiveness to me.

As Christians, we are often told that we should follow Jesus. And follow Jesus to the cross if necessary. Well, today is that day. Good Friday is the day that we have followed Jesus through Lent and are now at the cross. And now that we are here, what should we do? This morning, at the foot of this cross, I invite each one of us to forgive someone.

I invite each one of us to consider our own lives. And I invite us to reflect on a person or a situation where we need to forgive someone. Perhaps someone who we have been resisting forgiveness to. Perhaps a forgiveness that we have been thinking is simply too expensive. The other person does not have to be present. The other person does not even have to be alive. Because forgiveness is something we do ourselves. Forgiveness is when we relinquish our need for control and revenge. Forgiveness is when we release our negative thoughts about the other person. Forgiveness is when we decide to move forward in our own lives.

Forgiveness is unlocking a door to set someone free – and realizing that you yourself were the prisoner.

The choir will now sing, and after that I will invite us all into a liturgy of forgiveness.

The way to the cross leads to many things. Today it is my hope and my prayer that it leads each of us to a deep forgiveness of someone.

Amen.

During the liturgy of forgiveness:

- From the Lord's Prayer - what is the relationship between receiving forgiveness from God and offering forgiveness to others? It's not cattle trading!
- How do we live out forgiven lives if we cannot understand forgiveness?
- How do we live out resurrection lives if we cannot forgive others?
- Invite people to use paper:
 - write the name of a person or situation
 - come forward and burn the paper
 - stay and watch the paper burn because forgiveness takes time
 - walk away - let go and let God