
As we forgive those ...
Sydenham-Heritage 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.

[image: forgiveness cloud]

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, and as something that we even give to ourselves. 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 as if 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 feel a bit complicated. And real forgiveness is hard work.

[image: forgiveness gift]

I 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”. Which always struck me as odd. I figure if we love someone we would not hesitate to offer forgiveness when appropriate. 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 \$40.” It's no wonder that we as a society don't really know how to forgive.

So what is forgiveness? Let's consider what it is not.¹

[forgiveness light]

Forgiveness is *not* a feeling. Forgiveness is a decision. If you are waiting until you feel like forgiving someone, it may never happen. Forgiveness is a decision you - and only you - can make. And only you can decide when to do it.

Forgiveness is *not* condoning what the other person did to you. By forgiving someone you are not agreeing that the person's actions were “ok”.

Forgiveness is *not* pretending you were not hurt. If you had never been hurt, then forgiveness would not even be necessary. Forgiveness is about how *you* choose to live given your past (or even present) hurts.

Forgiveness is *not* forgetting. The idea that you need to “forgive and forget” is very dangerous. We are allowed to learn from our mistakes. We are allowed to not trust people who have proven that they are not trustworthy. Forgiveness is not an invitation to allow yourself to be wounded again.

Forgiveness is *not* taking away any responsibility from the other person. Even with forgiveness, the other person is still responsible to do their part of the work if they want to find their own freedom.

From my perspective, there are two basic problems with how we understand forgiveness. First of all, we often feel that forgiveness is for the benefit of the other person - usually the person who caused us pain in the first place. And secondly, we often

¹ adapted from <http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/faith-issues/personal-faith/forgiveness>

feel that forgiveness is about the past, that forgiveness is about somehow making the past “more fair”.

[image: forgive or not]

These ideas, combined, lead us to the idea that it is our “job” to withhold forgiveness from the other person until we feel they have suffered enough, or “learned their lesson”. And then, when *we* feel the other person is in the right space, *we* then grant them forgiveness. If that method actually worked, I might support it. But we all have personal stories where that just can’t happen. I mean, what if the other person is completely unaware of the issue that is weighing on us? They are not suffering. They are not “learning their lesson” no matter how long we wait. And moreover, why should we - the victims - be responsible for managing the person who caused us pain? The mistake we make is thinking that forgiveness is about the other person at all. Forgiveness is always about us - the person with the pain. And forgiveness is not about the past either - forgiveness is actually about the future - our future. Forgiveness is about us deciding how we will live our lives given the fact that the other person is still who they are.

Forgiveness is about the future, not the past, and it is about us, not the other person.

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 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 forgive 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 in every translation it is a large number. Jesus is a long way from the philosophy of 3 strikes here.

[image: forgiveness chains]

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 one of those days. Good Friday is the day that we have followed Jesus through Lent and we 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 else. Here's what I have in mind.

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 the healing that comes from forgiveness. Perhaps someone for whom we have been withholding forgiveness. 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. The other person might be you. Because forgiveness is something we do ourselves. Forgiveness is when we relinquish our need for control and revenge. Forgiveness is when we decide to move forward in our own lives. Remember, forgiveness is about ourselves, not the other person. And forgiveness - done properly - is always about our future, not our past.

Forgiveness is unlocking a door to set someone free - and realizing that you yourself were the prisoner. Today - at the foot of this cross - I invite you to stop being a prisoner to your past. Forgive, and be forgiven. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others.

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. Forgive, and live.

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 can we live out forgiven lives if we cannot understand forgiveness?
- How can we live out resurrection lives if we do not forgive others?
- Invite people to use paper:
 - write the name of a person or situation
 - come forward and shred the paper
 - stay and watch the paper being shredded because forgiveness takes time. Listen to the piercing sound of the shredder.
 - walk away - let go and let God