

LET IT GO

A Series on Forgiveness



LENT 2024



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CHURCH

“Forgiveness works through our ongoing willingness to give up certain claims against one another, to give the truth when we assess our relationships with one another, and to give gifts of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past. Being forgiven requires an ongoing willingness to honor a new claim that has been made on us, to speak with a new truthfulness, and to live in a new way with one another.”

— L. Gregory Jones, *Practicing Our Faith*



REFLECTION

Matthew 7:24-27

The Greek and Hebrew words most often translated as sin in the Bible refer to “Missing the Mark” (think archery and an arrow that misses the target) or “straying from the path” (picture someone wandering off a trail and hopelessly getting lost).

The implication is that there is a mark, an ideal, or a path that we are meant to follow in order to have a proper relationship with others or with God. We are meant to love and do justice, to care for people, and to tell the truth. If we did these things all of the time, there would be no need for forgiveness. So, what influences hold us back?

DISCUSSION

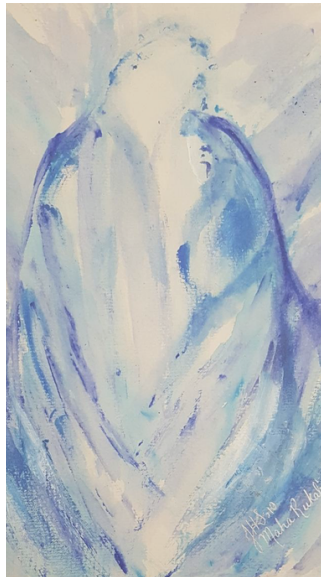
1. Who were the main characters/influences in your life of faith who demonstrated or helped form you in this understanding of the importance of forgiveness?
2. What “rains and winds” blow and beat against your own “house” these days that make forgiveness more difficult? What are the conditions (contextual factors, not demands) that make openness to forgiveness more likely in your own life?

ENGAGING OUR FAITH

What is your “Foundation” as it relates to forgiveness? Make some notes or even a timeline as to encounters you learned the power and impact forgiveness (or even unforgiveness) could facilitate in your life. What patterns do you notice?

“We know that we will be taken care of, no matter what. We can be vulnerable because we are, in the end, simply invulnerable. And once we have broken the power of anger and desire over our lives, we know that the way of Christ in response to personal injury and imposition is always the easier way. It is the only way that allows us to move serenely in the midst of the harm and beyond it.”

-Dallas Willard



"Theotokos"
"God-Bearer"
(Mother of God) Painting

ENGAGING OUR FAITH:

Laying Down Your Burden

Find something heavy, like a bag of potatoes, a backpack, or a stack of books. Think of the heavy item as the sins you are carrying. Walk down the hall and back (or even around the house) carrying it. As you walk:

- * Name these sins you still carry, even if only from time to time.
- * Let Jesus be a table, and unload your burden onto Jesus.
- * Then walk slowly down the hall and back (or around the house)
- * Come back to Jesus (the table) and thank Jesus for carrying your burdens.
- * Take the walk again, imagining Jesus right beside you as you walk without the burden. Notice how this feels when the weight has been lifted.
- * Take a few moments to write about your experience and insights from this exercise.

REFLECTION

Luke 13:31-35

Jesus' heart is broken, clearly. For we hear Him now crying out his heartache over Jerusalem --- that holy city which had been the seat of God's presence since ancient times. Jerusalem, where he found his home as a boy in the temple. Jerusalem, which would soon claim his life. One can imagine that even today, there are aspects of our lives that God also weeps about, such as those times we choose not to rest in grace, or think too much or too little of ourselves.

Neither are in keeping with God's intent, and both have consequences which might break any heart. When we forget that we are but one of the brood, watched over by God as a mother hen would, venture out on our own, putting ourselves and potentially others in harm's way, or when we do not believe ourselves to be in profound need of forgiveness just like all the rest, we tend not to see others as so very tender and so very vulnerable, too. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, yes. Jesus weeps over all those who turn their backs on his love. For all those still struggling, it is not—it is never— too late to begin again.

DISCUSSION

1. Jesus' lament is rooted in the fact that Jerusalem has turned her back on his love. How might we understand this first rejection of Jesus as the root of every other failure or shortcoming or sin that can and does mark our lives?
2. Think of a time when you were facing conflict or trouble, but you knew without a doubt that someone was “for” you. How did that make a difference? What did they say or what did they do that impacted you in such a way that it made the unpleasant situation bearable?

"Christ's sacrifice relocates our lives as forgiven betrayers, as reconciled sinners, in communities of broken yet restored communion."

- L. Gregory Jones



ENGAGING OUR FAITH:

Seeing Communion Anew

Approach the experience of Communion in our church on Sunday as a means of grace with new eyes. The center of the Lord's Supper is the reminder that Christ has reconciled the world to himself. Reflect on these truths L. Gregory Jones reminded us of, in the quote above, as you partake at Jesus' table—a reminder to you and tangible experience of both your shortcomings along with your belovedness. If you haven't taken the opportunity to pray at the altar rail before, try that and lift to God what binds you.

REFLECTION

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-17

This week's passage we find Paul sharing the communion table as an opportunity to flee from idolatry in the Christian life. We often find the temptation to see ourselves as powerful agents in the process of forgiveness, but we are invited to remember that God is the "host" and the primary actor. In a sermon called, "To Whom Much is Given," Theologian Paul Tillich offers a perspective that speaks to this: "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence." This is the answer to questions like how to keep the desire for revenge from consuming, or how to be unburdened from wrongs we have done, or whether reconciliation is even possible in human relationships. The communion table serves as a constant and ever-present reminder of our need and God's ultimate provision.

DISCUSSION:

1. How has the church served as a place where unlikely healing of the world's divisions happens? When has the church been a point of hurt?
2. John Wesley described communion as a "converting sacrament." This means there is nothing required for a person to be welcomed to God's table. What conversion do you sense is emerging in your life today?

“Jesus chose the way of the cross as the clearest expression of how God confronts and deals with human evil, not by responding in kind, evil for evil, but by extending self-giving, nonresistant love.”

-David Augsburger



ENGAGING OUR FAITH:

Tracing the Myths

Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us not only of what forgiveness is, but what it is not. These truthful reminders of what forgiveness is not are outlined in *The Book of Forgiving*: weakness, injustice, forgetting, easy, and quick.

For each of these myths about forgiveness, call to mind an instance in your life, either past or present, where that myth has held or is now holding you back from granting forgiveness.

REFLECTION

Luke 15:1-10

In the Hebrew scriptures, there was a common understanding in the law that upheld reciprocity or vengeance as the standard of righteousness, fairness, and justice. This notion was known as “Lex talionis,” or in other words, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

As Jesus came to redefine many aspects of faithful living out of life together, He also shifted this understanding with the stories He told and truths He taught. “The Prodigal Son,” one of the most famous stories (parables) Jesus told on forgiveness, helps to illuminate the lesson that forgiveness does not subvert justice—it creates space for justice to be enacted with purity of purpose that does not include revenge for those we love. In this story, we experience a look into the mirror to examine our own need for justice which is based on an unhealthy pride. As Fredrick Buechner said, it is “pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness,” and leaves us in a prison of our own making.

DISCUSSION

1. Is there a situation where you have felt tempted to over retaliate?
2. Can you think of individuals you don't feel love toward, per se, but whom you could will their good? How might willing their good change your relationship with them?

“Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound to the chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness, that person will be our jailor.”

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu



ENGAGING OUR FAITH:

A New Way of Seeing

Take a few minutes to write down “God is no longer dealing with us on the basis of our sins.” Reflect and write down or share with a group what that means to you, or why you struggle with this notion.

REFLECTION

Isaiah 43:16-21

This week we are considering the real-life change the prophet Isaiah was (and is) speaking over God's people, inviting us to see beyond present circumstances. Part of what allows us to do that throughout the generations is the confession and turning in our life of faith to a deeper trust of God and release of the past and its hold on us. To be clear—God's forgiveness is not dependent upon our own confession or awareness. This would make God's capacity and action woefully small. Instead, as James Bryan Smith says, "We confess in order to be healed confession is the road to healing."

John Wesley experienced a moment of "turning" because of this promise on May 24, 1738. One evening, he went to a Christian fellowship where he heard a man reading the preface to Luther's Commentary on Romans and later wrote in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Most Methodists mark this event as the beginning of the Methodist movement. Wesley came to believe that God was no longer dealing with us based on our sins. This was a teaching so profound it helped Wesley and others see beyond present circumstances what could be, sparking movements that have changed the world.

DISCUSSION

1. Do you recognize the false narrative that God's forgiveness requires our confession? Or is this a new idea for you to ponder and identify?
2. Are you unsure of God's attitude toward you? If so, what sources have fed that uncertainty? What is your belief about how God views you?

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love,”
-Martin Luther King Jr.



ENGAGING OUR FAITH: *Witnessing the Anguish*

If you are a person in need of being heard, can you muster the courage to ask directly for that hearing with a person to accompany you for comfort and reassurance?

REFLECTION

Luke 22:14-23:56

Palm Sunday reminds us of our need to define power and powerlessness. The people were desperate for a leader to relieve their struggle and fear, and for generations would hang their hopes on whichever new military leader may promise that deliverance. However, relief from pain without the deeper work required within to be a genuinely receptive vessel for that freedom is always short-lived.

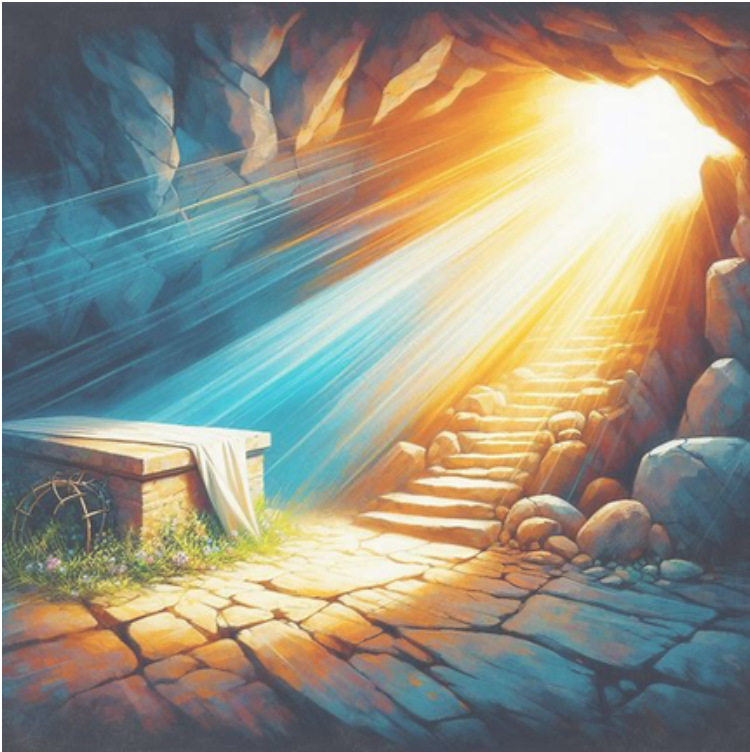
Archbishop Desmond Tutu knew this. As he speaks of his experience of finding truth and reconciliation in South Africa, he reminds us of the reality that victims need to tell their stories and release pain in the community of others. Victims need to express how much they have been hurt. As perpetrators or those who seek forgiveness, must be fearless enough to stand in front of those we have hurt and open our hearts to make space for their pain. We had a part in creating it, and we have a part in helping that person and relationship heal.

DISCUSSION

1. What makes sitting in pain so difficult in the human condition?
2. When have you hung your hopes in the wrong place to get relief from your pain? What journey did you take to discover and redirect your energies?

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



ENGAGING OUR FAITH:

Gratitude Practice

We have been focusing a great deal this series on those for whom we harbor unforgiveness and those from whom we may wish to receive forgiveness. This week, you are invited to look beyond these relational dynamics to engage in gratitude practice for those who have remained faithful, kind, and trustworthy in your life—the ones who model love in a pure way that help us remember the goal to which we are striving.

REFLECTION

Mark 16:1-8

When we have hatred for others, we carry that hatred in our own hearts and it harms us even more, certainly, than it does them. We are created for fellowship. We are created to form the human family, existing together because we were made for one another. We are not made for exclusivity or self-sufficiency but for interdependence. We break this essential law of our being at our peril. We take care of our world by taking care of each other—it is as simple and as difficult as that. How we take care of each other is by cultivating our forgiveness. Forgiveness, like any other quality—compassion, kindness, or generosity—must be fostered and developed.

DISCUSSION

1. Has there been a particular part of this series that has been helpful to you in the state of your life and relationships right now? Share that thanksgiving with your small group or with someone in your life you trust.
2. What one practice might you need to carry through as an outgrowth of this series to continue to grow a mindset of forgiveness rather than a mindset of grievance?

Happy Easter!



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