

**SERMON TITLE: "YOU ASKED FOR IT: WHY FORGIVE?"**

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**SCRIPTURE TEXTS: Ephesians 4: 29-32, Matthew 6: 9-13**

The idea of forgiveness is often unthinkable to people who have been hurt, abused, rejected, or misunderstood by other individuals. Forgiveness seems foreign or impossible when you're in pain from past mistreatment that keeps interfering with your life and happiness in the present. A first human reaction is to strike back or get even or to feel victimized by perceived or actual mistreatment and such lives become diminished or debilitated by continued bitterness, resentment and helplessness.

In my own family I have observed this first-hand in the divorce of my older sister. After nineteen years of an up and down marriage, her husband asked for a divorce. Left with two teenagers my sister fought for everything she could get, bad-mouthed her ex-husband to her children, and generally made life miserable for everyone. Now it's almost thirty years later – she rarely sees her son or his children and her relationship with her daughter and family is strained. Her existence as a professed Christian is at best described as alone and disconnected.

Several questions have been raised about forgiveness in the framework of the "You Asked for It" summer series. "How does one let go of hurt and angry feelings?" "How do you forgive someone who isn't sorry and doesn't ask for forgiveness?" "How do you forgive without being stupid, taken advantage of, or allowing another person to continue to hurt you?" "Is it possible to forgive and forget?" "In the Lord's prayer, is God's forgiveness of our sin dependent upon whether we forgive people who sin against us?" These questions are very real in our life experiences and our responses to them determine both our individual peace and the way in which we live out our Christian faith.

Our Gospel text this morning is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. (Read Mtt. 6:9-13) The theologian F. F. Bruce points out Jesus' emphasis on the necessity of having a forgiving spirit as central to the gospel. In the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, the word for "sin" is the same as the word for "debt," and so everyone who is indebted to us means "everyone who has sinned against us." This wording implies that the person praying has already forgiven any injury received; otherwise it would be impossible honestly to ask God's forgiveness for one's own sins. This emphasis is repeated in verses 14 and 15 following the prayer. Under grace we are forgiven for Christ's sake and are to forgive because we have been forgiven. This is the grace that the Apostle Paul speaks of in our epistle reading. (Ephesians 4:32).

Paul Tournier, Swiss doctor and counselor, in his book, *Guilt and Grace*, states, "These words (in Matthew 6) could be taken in the sense of a "condition," a right, a meritorious demand, for a forgiveness which we gain by the forgiveness which we ourselves grant to others. How tragic that would be for us! What a burden would press upon us! - - - If Christ's teaching is taken in this simplistic way and God is credited with a conditional love, salvation is then placed back on our shoulders and we cannot fulfill it or feign it."

Far better, one should understand these words of Christ as a factual description of the way things happen, of the route that is followed. It was our fear of not being loved which prevented us, in spite of our resolve, from genuinely forgiving others. But when we grasp and experience God's love as unconditional, we find the power to forgive others. God does not love us because we love or obey him and so fulfill some condition, but rather in John's words, "because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) Despite our sin(s) God didn't worry about being taken

advantage of, of being gullible, or somehow being hurt. Rather in Jesus Christ God demonstrates a kind of signpost to show us the path by which we can forsake our despair with God's love in Christ leading us there. It is not because of us, but because of the divine nature of our Lord that God forgives us. God's free love and forgiveness produces reconciliation in Jesus Christ; this is the experience which transforms us and generates a new outlook in our walk with the Lord who desires restored relationship and transformed living.

Let's now move from the theological explanation to the practical aspects related to forgiveness. I first want to look at just what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is not something we do naturally. For some reason we have difficulty forgiving the mistakes of others even though we expect them to forgive our mistakes. In order to extend forgiveness, we must overcome the road blocks of pride, fear, revenge and social pressure. When we think of ourselves as all important, we tend to take offense at slights, to be resentful toward others. In more serious offenses such as violent crimes, divorce, and slander our natural desire for revenge gets in the way of forgiveness. When we're hurt, we want to fight back; we want to take justice into our own hands and, given the right circumstances, we all are capable of being very hostile toward others, either directly or indirectly. We fear that our forgiveness would put a stamp of approval on the other person's actions and would give that person license to hurt us again. We feel we will be vulnerable and misunderstood. We often expect that our apology would be an admission of being the one in the wrong. In our society a forgiving person is often viewed as weak, soft, or misguided. Society as a whole is not geared in this direction – our society is often cruel, impatient, cranky, and hostile.

Forgiveness can be costly. Any time we forgive we are consenting to be wronged in giving up our perceived rights and that can hurt. In doing so, we agree to bear the pain of the other person's wrong action. Our forgiveness can be rejected and when it is not received, it feels incomplete. However, the forgiver has done all she or he can. Henri Nouwen in *Bread for the Journey* put it this way, "To forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation. We set that person free from the negative bonds that exist between us. We say, "I no longer hold your offense against you." But there is more. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the "offended one." As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us or, worse, pull them as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness, therefore, liberates not only the other but also ourselves. It is the way to the freedom of the children of God."

Forgiveness is not indifference. Forgiveness is not agreeing with the wrong. Instead forgiveness says, "Yes, you wronged me. I hurt but I will not allow that hurt to control me. I will forgive you and give you release from any obligation I may see for you to repay me." Again Henri Nouwen helps us, "Forgiving the other is first and foremost an inner movement. It is an act that removes anger, bitterness, and the desire for revenge from our hearts and helps us to reclaim our human dignity. We cannot force those we want to forgive into accepting our forgiveness. They might not be able or willing to do so. They may not even know or feel that they have wounded us. The only people we can really change are ourselves. Forgiving others is first and foremost healing our own hearts."

Illustrative of this truth are the following accounts. Patti Davis, Ronald Reagan's daughter, was impacted by her father's response to the assassination attempt in 1981. She writes in her book *Angels Don't Die*, "The following day my father said he knew his physical healing was directly dependent on his ability to forgive John Hinckley. By showing me that forgiveness is the key to everything, including physical health and healing, he gave me an example of Christlike thinking." The same choice was demonstrated by Pope John Paul who, though severely wounded, went to the prison where his would-be assassin was held and forgave him.

John Plummer was haunted by the 1972 Vietnam-era Pulitzer Prize winning photo of nine year old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, naked and horribly burned, running from a napalm attack. The special significance for him was that he was responsible for directing the air strike on the village of Trang Bang after headquarters' assurance that there were no civilians in the area. He felt pain and guilt each time he saw that picture in the years that followed. After becoming a Christian in 1990, Plummer felt God's call, attended seminary, and was ordained a Methodist minister. In June, 1996, he learned that Kim Phuc was still alive and living in Toronto. The next month he attended a military reunion and met someone who knew her and the photographer and learned the rest of the story. Kim Phuc and her family were hiding in the town pagoda that fateful day when a bomb hit the building. She and others ran into the street where they were hit by napalm dropped from another plane. She tore off her burning clothes and fled. Two of her cousins were killed. The photographer and other journalists poured water on her burns and rushed her to a hospital. She spent fourteen months in various hospitals and was finally operated on by a San Francisco plastic surgeon.

Plummer learned that Kim Phuc was speaking at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D. C. He went and heard her say that if she ever met the pilot of the plane, she would tell him she forgives him and that they cannot change the past, but she would hope they could work together in the future. Plummer was able to get word to her that the man she wanted to meet was there. Plummer states in an article in *The Virginia Advocate*, "She saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow. She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was I'm sorry; I'm sorry; I'm sorry over and over again. At the same time, she was saying, It's all right; it's all right' I forgive, I forgive." She had become a Christian and forgave as she was forgiven. Plummer asked for forgiveness and experienced it anew.

Our ability to forgive is based on being loved and forgiven. It is the response to God's gracious unconditional love for you and me. It is an act of will and, even despite our feelings, we can choose to forgive. God chose in Christ to forgive us in love and to teach us love in forgiveness. By that act relationship is restored and our lives are transformed. Nobody can make you or me forgive. Only a genuinely free person can choose to live with an uneven score. Only a free person can choose to start over, to live with accounts unsettled, to heal the memory of hurt and hate. When you forgive you are surprised by your own freedom to choose to do it. It gives you a different perspective on the slight or the hurtful act. You move on to greater freedom which is experienced as strength and empowerment. You know you have it when you exercise your power to forgive. Lewis Smedes in his book, *Forgive and Forget*, declares, "Such forgiveness appears outrageous: when you do it you commit an outrage against the strict morality which will not be satisfied with anything short of an even score. When you forgive you come as close as humanly possible to the essentially divine act of creation: creating a new beginning out of past pain and trauma, and initiating healing for the future by changing a past which had no possibility in it for anything but self-destructive behavior and meaninglessness"

"Why Forgive?" Because such forgiveness in response to God's gracious unconditional love and transforming forgiveness is the essence of new life and wholeness which produces a creative perspective and pathway of healthy concern and compassion in and through our Savior. We forgive because we are forgiven. Thanks be to God for this gift of freedom to choose forgiveness and be renewed.

Amen

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