

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Way of the Cross,
A Lenten Series on Forgiveness:
Forgiving”**

**Genesis 50:15-21
Matthew 18:23-35**

**Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017**

Genesis 50:15-21

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Matthew 18:23-35

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

"The Way of the Cross, A Lenten Series on Forgiveness: Forgiving"

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week we talked about the third step towards reconciliation, which is repentance. It is appropriate that repentance comes right in the middle of the five steps Marjorie J. Thompson elaborates on in her book *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*. Repentance, she argues and I agree, is the principal act of the cross event. At the cross, we find the intersection of God's divine love and divine justice. Our sins were nailed on the cross with Jesus. Our condemnation was played out on the cross with Jesus. And yet—this is the sad part—and yet, we still turn and sin against God and neighbor. Each of us is in constant need of saying we're sorry. Repentance, then, is the turning point. Remember *metanoia*, a change in mind and attitude. To get to repentance, we need to be able to examine ourselves and be honest with ourselves about the sins we commit against God and neighbor. We need to be able to say we're sorry, and be truly remorseful for our actions or inactions. But the repentance part is only half of the full equation. Reconciliation is a bringing

back into harmony, which means there are two parties who are at odds or in disagreement. One party seeks forgiveness, while the other offers it. Forgiving is the topic at hand for this morning.

Forgiveness is central to the Gospel message. It is as much a part of Christianity as the Trinity or Communion. Other world religions have aspects of forgiveness woven into their theologies, but none other has it at the center of faith than Christianity. The cross event, which is so integral to who we are, is the purest example of forgiveness extended to the human race. Not only are Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection signs of forgiveness, but also our Lord, himself, frequently preached on forgiving. For instance, in Matthew 6:12, at the heart of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray "and *forgive* us our debts, as we also have *forgiven* our debtors." In Luke's recording of the Sermon on the Plain in 6:37, Jesus says, "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; *forgive, and you will be forgiven.*" The parable we read this morning came about because Peter asked Jesus in Matthew 18:22 if he should forgive someone seven times; Jesus responds, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." This is also translated as seventy times seven, which is "a number yet more unimaginable to Peter."¹ Paul even picks up on forgiveness and tells the Colossians in 3:13 to forgive each other, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also *must* forgive." If we were to make a list of the top five doctrines of Christianity, forgiveness would certainly be included, if doesn't already come at the head of that list. You see, forgiveness isn't just a downward activity, it's not just God forgiving us through the cross. We are called to offer forgiveness as well. When we are wronged, we are not to take up arms against our offender, but extend forgiveness. That's hard to do, isn't it?

Nowhere do we find a more extraordinary tale of forgiving our fellows than in the Parable of the Unrepentant Servant that we read this morning. In this story, we see a king who wishes to settle accounts with his servants. God is the king and we are invited to place ourselves in the shoes of the unforgiving servant. Now, in order for us to fully understand the weight of this story, we'll need to understand the sums represented. The 10,000 talents of the first slave is roughly equivalent to 150,000 years of wages while the 100 denarii of the second slave is equivalent to 3.5 months of wages. If we used today's minimum wage, that's about \$60 a day, which equals a grand debt of \$3,285,000,000. This is huge! The servant whom the king forgave owed over 3.2 billion dollars, while the other slave only owed him \$6,000 (a small sum comparatively). And yet the first servant was willing to throw the second into the debtors' prison. "Jesus' point," says Thompson, "is that we owe God vastly more than what anyone could conceivably owe us."² Moreover, God has forgiven us of that debt, as is suggested in the parable; and Jesus is uncomfortably frank about the punishment of not forgiving. By all Scriptural accounts, forgiving is not optional, it is imperative. The human race, however, isn't always predisposed to do the godly thing. Our fallen selves "can easily block our acting on the knowledge that forgiveness is imperative for followers of Christ."³ Thompson writes of two responses for not offering forgiveness: "I should but I don't want to," and "I can't yet."⁴ We're going to unpack both of these this morning.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. Page 46.

² Thompson, 46.

³ Thompson, 47.

⁴ Thompson, 48.

The first response comes about when we feel entitled to something that we've lost and don't want to forgive. In these situations, Thompson suggests, "It can be a good exercise in self-examination to ask how much of what we feel is legitimate and how much makes a juicy-good story of victimhood to elicit sympathy from others."⁵ Let me use a story as an illustration.⁶ There was once a lady who worked in corporate America. She'd worked with this organization for over fifteen years. Well, like many Americans after 2008, her organization went through some economic constraints and therefore had to cut several positions. Hers was one of them. After fifteen loyal years, she was sacked! As you can imagine, the news came as quite a shock to her. She thought that her work was central and valuable to the organization, and that value would keep her on staff. Needless the say, she felt aggrieved and victimized. It seemed to her that all the hard work she'd put in was devalued. She felt at that moment the sting of realizing that she was far from indispensable to the organization. In her mind, these were blows to her ego. Her self-worth plummeted. Now, she could've easily wallowed in the seductions of feeling unjustly dismissed, knowing that many of her colleagues were also shocked and dismayed by what happened to her. At times, even their sympathy fueled her sense of entitlement and feelings of resentment.

But this story has a happy ending. Thankfully, she was aware enough and from early on she knew that these feelings were selfishly driven. That was the first step of self-examination. She was also honest with herself, and in so doing, a much larger picture came into focus. At that moment, she realized that God was simply closing a door, one that she thought about walking through many times. The honesty disclosed to her that she no longer felt fully engaged with the position she held at this organization. She knew for a while that it was time to move on but never drew up the courage to walk away from a good salary with benefits in a weakening economy. It was in this larger picture where she felt the Holy Spirit was pushing her out of her comfort zone and into an area of new-found freedom. That the decision was made *for* her rather than *by* her was simply part of the embarrassment she had to come to terms with. This corporate lady understood that there was no animosity behind the decision; rather, there was much agonizing and regret to layoff so many people, herself included. As long as she focused on "what they did to me," she placed herself in the victim stance, where resentment felt justified. But the moment she lifted her eyes from upon herself onto the work of the Divine, she could see clearly behind the surface facts, and no longer felt aggrieved but relieved. And it was at that point of comfort where forgiveness scarcely seemed relevant. Painful as it was to be torn away from a community of colleagues, and as anxiety-provoking as the loss of a steady income was, she could thank her boss for cutting the strings of organizational constraint and setting her loose to explore her calling afresh.

While this story did have a happy ending, we know from experience that this is not always the case. Situations like these become harmful when we allow caustic emotions to creep in and focus us inwardly. Remember, last week I mentioned sin makes us focus on ourselves, while grace causes us to focus outwards onto Christ and neighbors. When we allow ourselves to be consumed by selfish desires, we can become bitter and angry. We lose sight of the bigger picture that God has in store. Thompson raises some good questions that I think we can ponder on when

⁵ Thompson, 48.

⁶ The following story is adapted from Thompson's own experience as recorded in pages 48-49.

a circumstance like this happens to us. “How do we see a situation when we step away from our egos? How broad or high is our perspective, and what might God’s perception be? What new possibilities lie within the pain of the moment? What new life sleeps inside this form of death, waiting to be awakened?” These are very good questions, and “our capacity to explore such questions will depend in part on the nature of the offense, the depth of the wound experienced, and the level of our own emotional and spiritual maturity.”⁷ If we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we allow divine wisdom to lead us. Remember what James tells us, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”⁸ God’s wisdom brings us to the level of emotional and spiritual maturity that Thompson says is necessary for honest self-examination.

That was a story of when we might not want to forgive because of selfish reasons. There are times in our lives when we can’t yet forgive. This isn’t just holding a grudge because we felt entitled to something. This is the type of loss that reaches deep into the soul or actively influences others. If, shall we say, in the story of the corporate lady, “the loss of [her] job created a serious financial crisis for [her] family, [she] might well have needed more time to acknowledge and absorb the larger positive picture.”⁹ In that case, the loss didn’t impact at just a personal or selfish level, it impacted a wider group of people, her family. Thompson affirms that saying, “‘I can’t yet’ is a perfectly honest and reasonable response and may even be the healthiest response under some circumstances.”¹⁰ She continues, “Serious offenses against the humanity of a person involving physical or psychological trauma cannot be forgiven quickly. When we are deeply wounded by betrayal or violence, it will take time, perhaps a long time, before sufficient inner healing prepares the soil of our hearts to nurture the fruit of forgiveness.”

¹¹ I’m sure you can think of a time in your own life or in the life another where this forgiveness was hard to muster. Now imagine if you have hurt someone that deeply. You can see why they may have yet to forgiven you.

I’ll share a personal story. When I got married, I invited three of my closest friends to be my groomsmen. Two I had known since primary school and one I befriended while at college. One of them, I have known since sixth grade. He and I have experimented and experienced so much throughout our grade school years. And I mean everything, from the video games and outdoor play to the various things high school boys get into. I came here to Virginia to go to college, while he stayed in Alabama to attend one of the local state universities. We texted back and forth throughout the school year, and every winter and summer that I went home, we spent countless hours in tomfoolery. By the time I went off to seminary, however, we had been separated enough that we had two distinct friend groups—as opposed to the high school circles we shared immediately after graduation. Nevertheless, I was determined to have the one friend I shared the most experience with come and participate in a day that was very special for me. So, we talked and prepared and I told him all the details of the wedding. Well, come two days before the wedding, and we’re all gathered in Denver, save for him. At first, we thought maybe he was

⁷ Thompson, 49-50.

⁸ James 3:17.

⁹ Thompson, 50.

¹⁰ Thompson, 50.

¹¹ Thompson, 51.

running late. But as that day drew to a close, he did not appear. I called his cell phone four times—twice it rang without a pickup and twice it went straight to voicemail. I had to call his father to find out that he never left Alabama. Moreover, his father had no idea that I was even getting married! Eventually, through other avenues, I found out that he apparently couldn't get that weekend off from work.

Now, this example is by no means a tragedy, no one had their identity stolen or died. Nonetheless, I felt betrayed by one of my oldest and closest friends. I would've been extremely reasonable if he told me he couldn't get that weekend off, especially with enough advanced notice. I most certainly would've missed having him present, but I would've understood. Instead, I felt like our friendship, no, our brotherhood, was nothing to him. The betrayal was compounded since he didn't even share my engagement with his family, whom I consider an extended family of my own. Even to this day I still haven't talked to him. I've sent him a letter, but I don't know if I can forgive him just yet. I'm sure I will eventually, but for now the wound is still too deep, too fresh. He hasn't even said he was sorry. Part of this sermon series is for my benefit. I hope that I am not holding a selfish grudge or grasping onto emotions of entitlement. I think that's where the self-examination will help me the most. But I do have a hope that he and I will be reconciled one day.

Allow me to close with this final word. Forgiveness is so much a part of who we are as Christians. It is in our theological framework and it runs in our ancestral DNA. We are called to offer forgiveness when someone comes to us in repentance. We shouldn't seek to hold a grudge or use a person's contrition against them. Remember Jesus' parable: God has already forgiven us of a debt so unimaginable, let us not hold on to the relatively insignificant offenses of others and open our hearts to forgiveness. And, in some cases, it is healthier, for a time, to say, "I can't forgive you right now," but we should never let that be the final word. We should, even in the most painful of circumstances, and in due time, open ourselves to God's calling of forgiveness. Next week we shall close this series with the final result of reconciliation.

Let us pray. "Holy God, your willing grace astonishes us when we consider what we, as human beings, have done to each other, to your creatures, and to this beautiful earth. Each of us has the seeds of destructiveness within us, yet we struggle with hard feelings when it comes our turn to forgive others. Soften the soil in our hearts with the spring rain of your grace; prepare us to be merciful as you are merciful. We ask this in the name of Christ, your mercy poured out upon us. Amen."¹²

¹² Thompson, 86.