

David C. Myers
March 13, 2011
Lent – 1

“*Forgiven as We Forgive*”

Matthew 5: 21 – 24

Luke 6:32 - 37

Matthew 6:12

Text: “Forgive us our sin, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.” (Matt. 6:14)

“Forgive us our sin, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.” Or, as a small child prayed one night at her bedside, “And forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are dead against us.”

And there is always Oscar Wilde, “Always forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them so much.”

The more I study the Prayer of Jesus, or the Lord’s Prayer, the more I am impressed with it. For example, last week I mentioned there is a connection in the faith and human developmental theorists. As people develop as humans the first thing they must learn is “trust”; so the first petition of people is “give us this day the things we need.” When we have the physical things we need to sustain us with daily regularity – food, bread, clothes, water – we can trust the world as a relatively safe place where there is enough to meet our needs. Then we move on to spiritual and relational issues. And today that comes in the form of dealing with forgiveness.

Forgiveness was described by the great American theologian of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, as the final form of love.

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by *hope*.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by *faith*.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by *love*.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is *forgiveness*.”¹

Niebuhr understood that forgiveness is the final form of love because it is also the hardest form of love – but it is also the most freeing form of love. Forgiveness is not easy – either in doing it, receiving it, or living with it.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Harper and Row, New York, 1952. p.52

In preparing this sermon I came across a wonderful article on forgiveness on the “blog” of the Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge². Within the sermon her story of learning to forgive is going to be interspersed. It begins by her sharing the incident that required forgiveness.

Many years have passed, but just thinking about an event with a past landlord can still set my blood to boiling. He sued my ex and me for “damages” to an apartment we left. We suspected he inflicted the “damage” himself so he could make us foot the bill for some renovations he wanted to do. However, we had not proof and ended up paying him to avoid court action.

Even today I seethe when I think how he lied and cheated, and got away with it. His house was on my way to work after we moved out and every time I passed by I would salute him with the international sign of friendship – taking great pleasure when he was actually out in his yard so he could see me.

I hated him – with every fiber of my being. It’s the first time I think I really understood on a fundamental level what the Bible calls a “perfect” hatred.

But, eventually, I had to forgive him. Not for his benefit – but for mine. The hatred I carried for this man began to adversely affect my life. I would lash out in displaced anger at others, including my spouse at the time. My impotent rage for this man and his unethical actions were hurting me far more than they would ever hurt him. It had to stop.

And of course, in the Lord’s Prayer we are told asked to pray, “Forgive us our sin, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Forgive me my sins and I will try to forgive others,” but instead says to us that our own forgiveness depends on our forgiving others – first!

And once again, we need to remember that each and every one of the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer is in the imperative tense. “Forgive us our sin, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.” It is a demand that, yes, our sin be forgiven; but with an equally strong demand that can only happen as we have already forgiven others. And while forgiving others can be a freeing process, it is by no means, an easy process.

I began a long process of letting go of my anger for him. But, even now, just thinking about it again, I can conjure up all those old feelings of hatred, anger, and pure, unadulterated rage. I can feel my body tense and my heart beat a bit faster as I ruminate on the details of that time. I may have forgiven, but I have not forgotten.

Now, there is this matter of the popular phrase, “forgive and forget.” Jesus never said that; and psychologists tell us that is simply not possible. When we have been hurt by another, those memories will stay. However, if we do not forgive, we will be forever

² Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge, “Is It Crazy to Forgive Those Who Hurt You? A Christian Perspective”; Posted on her blog, Feb 14, 2011

tied to the thing we hate. I have known for a long time that hate is not the opposite of love; but rather apathy is love's opposite. It takes a lot of energy, emotional energy to hate someone.

No doubt when someone has offended us we want to be free of that person forever. But that cannot happen if we do not forgive. By having an enemy constantly on your mind, consciously hating that person and forever holding that grudge saps us of emotional energy we could be directing positively. Forgiveness sets us free, it allows us to no longer fixate on the enemy; it breaks our patterns of hatred and rage, which ultimately controls our behavior.

Studies on anger and forgiveness have shown that what I really wanted in this situation was a sense of control. By the landlord's actions, and my inability to stop him, I felt that I had been taken advantage of, that I had lost control over events in my own life. . . . Research shows stress increases when we consider revenge rather than forgiveness.

Indeed the research suggests "that we may be drawn to hold grudges 'because that makes us feel like we are more in control and we are less sad.' But interviews with subjects indicate that they felt in even greater control when they tried to empathize with their offenders and enjoyed the greatest sense of power, well-being and resolution when they managed to grant forgiveness. Dr. Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet³ reports in her studies on forgiveness, "If you are willing to exert the effort it takes to be forgiving, there are benefits both emotionally and physically."

One of those benefits [of forgiveness] is regaining a sense of control over your life. I may not be able to make my former landlord any less of a lying, thieving jerk, but I can control how I feel about that sort of person. Instead of hatred, I now feel a sense of pity for him. I forgive him now because I know he honestly doesn't know any other way to behave. He has problems that I can't begin to understand.

But I had to take that difficult first step and forgive him. It took me a long time because I was actually enjoying hating him – but it was necessary so I could finally break that bond of hatred that tied me to him forever.

As a Christian, I am commanded to forgive, "seventy times seven" if that's what it takes. We balk at this notion. Why on earth should we be forced to forgive someone who hurt us? Jesus explains it this way in Luke 6:37: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." As Christians our own forgiveness hinges on how forgiving we are.

Emmet Fox in his book, **Sermon on the Mount** makes the point that by not forgiving we "are tied to the thing[we] hate. The person perhaps in the whole world

³ From *Time Magazine* article "Should All Be Forgiven?" April 5, 1999

whom you most dislike is the very one to whom you are attaching yourself by a hook that is stronger than steel. Fix then poses the question to us: “Is that what you wish?”

It was not what I wished at all. I wanted to be rid of the landlord forever. After all, isn't that why we gave him the money, to get him out of our lives for good? My refusal to forgive him just kept him in my life longer than necessary. By having him on my mind, and consciously hating him and holding that grudge, I tied myself to the very thing I hated. Forgiving him may not have done much for him – but it set me free.

Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer*, says that “The offense is real, but when we forgive, the offense no longer controls our behavior.”

I finally stopped [making obscene gestures when I passed by] my old landlord's house. I no longer fixate on it. By forgiving him, I've released myself from a pattern of old hatred and rage. It no longer controls my behavior.

The only condition Jesus places on forgiveness is that it begins with us. By having us pray “forgive us our sin as we also have forgiven those who sin against us” obliges us to declare that we have actually forgiven others first. In other words, in order for us to receive forgiveness, it is dependent on forgiving others. We cannot be set free to love until we are released from the shackles of retribution, anger, jealousy, even hatred against one who has wronged us. Alan Paton, the great South African author who wrote against apartheid in the middle of the 20th century once said, “When a deep injury is done, we never recover until we forgive.”

While forgiveness may never fully restore us to the previous condition prior to be offended; it will provide peace of mind. And that happens even if you never actually tell the person you have forgiven them. Forgiveness, as Jesus knew is something we must do for ourselves, so we can move on and begin to feel whole once again.

So we continue to pray, “Forgive us our sin, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.”

The first step in forgiveness is for us to realize that we need to forgive in order to be freed of our own demons. We can choose to carry a chip on our shoulder, a grudge against someone who has wronged us, or we can begin the process of letting go of our anger and resentment, and learn to forgive.

Even scientists, the medical and mental health professions tell us that forgiveness makes us physically and mentally healthier. And while forgiveness isn't restricted to being religious, or something that only religious people do; perhaps we can have a greater appreciation for Jesus Who taught us that *only when* we forgive, will we in turn be forgiven.

And God knows we can all use some forgiveness.