

## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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**Judie Ritchie"**

**Glad You Asked - Forgiveness: How Do We Move on After We've Been Hurt?"**

**Matthew 6:9-15**

Today's topic was selected in response to the questions that all of you asked. As a pastor for 27 years, I can tell you that in any group, even or maybe especially in a Christian congregation, many people are struggling with forgiveness. I would venture to say that there is probably not one person here who has not struggled with either forgiving someone or receiving forgiveness. It is an important topic and one that is really at the heart of the Christian faith.

I want to pass on two quotes as we begin. You may have heard this quote from Anne Lamott before, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." A lot of truth in that. The other quote, an exhortation from someone who suffered a lot of abuse as a child, "So here is my counsel to those who have suffered. If you have never been able to forgive, you are allowing the person who hurt you to live rent-free in your heart. It's costing him nothing and costing you everything. Perhaps it's time for you to evict him through forgiveness."

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, some of us here have drunk the rat poison and are feeling the effects. Lord, some of us here need to evict people who have lived too long in our hearts. We confess, Lord, we need Your power, Your Spirit, to begin to forgive. Holy Spirit, come and use these words of Scripture and these meditations to speak truth and to help us begin that process of forgiveness so dear to Your heart. We pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Our text is from the Sermon on the Mount. It is the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

This is one of those times when we don't struggle to understand the Bible—we struggle to obey it. The plain meaning of Jesus' words could not be more clear. Our willingness to forgive others is tied up with God's forgiveness of us. Here is how Eugene Peterson paraphrased verses 14 and 15, "In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part." This word *forgive* in Greek can also be translated *let go*. Jesus' words proclaim a hard truth that, if we can't let go, we can't let God. So if you are holding on to hatred and to resentment and to bitterness, the Word of God proclaims that you are missing out on God's forgiveness. That is the plain sense of Scripture. That is not any kind of

fancy interpretation on my part. If you can't let go, you can't let God heal and restore or even comfort you.

It says, if you have your fist clenched very, very tightly around your hurts and wounds and you are holding on to them and cannot let them go and forgive—and there is that term again *let go*—you cannot receive into those clenched hands any gift that God might want to give you. It is only when we start to relax our clenched fists and open our hands in surrender and forgiveness that the Lord can use us and can give us the gifts He would like to give us: forgiveness, peace, love, and hope for the future.

First, let me say that not everything that happens to us, not every hurt in our lives, needs forgiveness. Sometimes we talk about forgiveness like, "I need to forgive him," but all we really need to do is to be a little more patient or tolerant or have a bit of humility.

This summer almost all of us saw or heard about Armando Galarraga being robbed of a 28-out, perfect game and, yes, it was a 28-out, perfect game. He was robbed of it by an atrocious call by the umpire, Jim Joyce. Now everyone agrees that Jim Joyce made a terrible call—including Mr. Joyce—but according to the arcane rules of baseball, Mr. Joyce cannot say, "Oh, made a mistake. Let's reverse that." So everyone agrees that Galarraga pitched a perfect game and the Jim Joyce robbed him of the satisfaction of having it in the record book even though everyone agrees he really did pitch a perfect game. So the next day before the game, the Tigers' manager sent Galarraga out to home plate to the umpire who had made the terrible call to present the starting lineup. And what happened? They shook hands. I think they even hugged and Mr. Joyce apologized.

If only every story of mistake and hurt turned out so well. If only everyone said, "I did wrong. I'm sorry," shook hands, hugged, and made up. This is the kind of hurt that just needs a little humility and compassion.

We often have these kinds of experiences in our lives. People seem self-absorbed when you are talking to them about something you really care about and they are not really paying attention or people cut in front of you in check-out lines or someone whom you know is always late. Sometimes we say, "Well, I'll just forgive them," or "I need to keep forgiving them." Well, they don't really need forgiveness, but we need to learn patience. We need to learn and then maybe we need a little confrontation.

Then there are the people who succeed when we fail. They get the promotion or the job that we had really hoped for. Well, they don't need forgiveness but we need to trust God for our future and our well-being. Or when people whom we want to notice us don't notice us: maybe you don't get invited to a party you wanted to attend or maybe years later you run into a teacher whom you really admired and the teacher can't remember your name or, heaven forbid, a pastor forgets your name.

These aren't really situations that need forgiveness even though we might use that terminology. People need understanding. We are all frail and human. We forget. We leave people out. We don't necessarily intend harm. But we all know that there are deep and real hurts that come along in people's lives. I cannot recommend too highly Lew Smedes' book. I knew it as *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. CPC's Pathway Bookstore has a newer

edition of it with a different title but it's by Dr. Lewis Smedes. Much of what I'm going to say comes from his wisdom.

Smedes says that hurts that need forgiveness are deep, they are personal, and they are unfair. It might begin as disloyalty. Someone who is supposed to be a friend or a family member treats us as if we are strangers, as if we had no close connection to them. Disloyalty can also become betrayal. A spouse has an affair. A coworker badmouths us behind our back and sabotages our chances of getting a promotion. A parent shows a pattern of disinterest month after month, year after year. Then there are those kinds of monstrous hurts that just defy imagination: sexual abuse, the murder of a child or a loved one, random acts of violence that attack without any warning. When we feel that kind of pain, we are tempted to say, "I cannot forgive," and "What kind of God would require me to forgive that person?" Well, maybe the same kind of God who forgave us and maybe the same kind of God who forgave those who killed His own Son.

You may remember back in October 2006 in a small Amish community in Pennsylvania, a stranger (he wasn't really a stranger, he was part of the small community but he wasn't Amish) came into an Amish schoolroom for girls and shot ten young girls, killing five of them. Just out of the blue; then he killed himself. Almost as soon as the awful details started coming out in the media, the victims' families, those Amish families, were offering not only forgiveness to the man who had shot their children even though he was dead but sympathy and compassion to his surviving family. These were not empty words like, "I forgive you." They took the form of attending the funeral of the shooter. More than half of the people who came to his funeral were Amish. Then the Amish set up a fund to help the killer's widow and her three young children. This was forgiveness that was expressed not just in words but with very practical help. How could the Amish possibly do this? How could they respond in such a different way than I think probably most of us would?

Here is the answer given by a professor who knows and works with the Amish. The Amish come out of the Anabaptist tradition in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe which was a martyr tradition. Many of their ancestors were killed, burned at the stake, decapitated, and so on, and so it is part of their response to forgive the enemy, to forgive the opponent. They also look to Jesus as the one they see as their example; Jesus said on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He instructs His disciples to forgive 70 times 7. The Amish would also say, "It is in the Lord's Prayer where Christians pray, 'Forgive us as we forgive those who have transgressed us.'" When we hear that, it sounds so simple. It sounds so right and yet we all know how very difficult real forgiveness can be.

The example of the Amish shows us two things about forgiveness. **First, forgiveness is a decision and second, forgiveness is a process.**

Forgiveness is a decision. We decide to let go. We decide to let go of the past. What is done is done. The past cannot change. That is the terrible truth. We cannot change the past where we were betrayed or hurt. All we can do, with God's help, is to let go of the past and try to move into the future. The Amish were able to make that decision almost immediately because of their deep-seated faith in Jesus. Jesus calls us to forgive. Jesus shows us how costly forgiveness can be. He suffered and died so that we can be forgiven, so how can we withhold forgiveness from others? Forgiveness begins as a decision.

Forgiveness is also a process. It works its way out. We work it out with the Lord's help. It begins when we answer the question, "Do you want to forgive?" with "Yes," but it doesn't stop there. The Amish made the decision to forgive and then they did practical things like going to the funeral and giving money to show that they had forgiven. They also had to continue to work out their own sense of trauma and grief. It wasn't as if they were somehow immune to that. As one professional who helped many of the Amish families said, "Because they hold no grudges, they are better able to concentrate on the work of their own healing." Forgiveness is a decision and it is also a process.

Maybe it helps to say what forgiveness is *not*. As a pastor, that is often what I end up talking with people about. They will say, "Okay, I want to forgive *but*..." and then they will start in on a list. So what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is not forgetting. If we are really deeply hurt, we are not going to forget. We may not be able to physically forget but we just don't let it have power over us any more. We don't hold that grudge. We don't want to review what happened or talk over and over about how awful that person was to us. That is giving the person an awful lot of power in our lives. Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Forgiveness is also not delivering the verdict of *not guilty*. To forgive does not mean that the person who injured you is innocent. It does not mean that we excuse someone else's behavior. Forgiveness does not mean that we tolerate what was done or that we even allow the circumstances to repeat themselves. A person who has been abused physically or sexually may forgive but they also have the wisdom to not trust the person whom they have just forgiven unless that other person works out a process and shows that he or she is worthy of trust. Forgiveness is a process.

When everyone works at expressing sorrow—not making excuses—and works at acknowledging hurt, responsibility, and rebuilding trust, then we can arrive at what the Bible calls reconciliation. But sometimes in this fallen world all we can do is work through the letting go of our own hurts, our own resentment, our own bitterness. We may feel that pain but we will forgive the person who inflicted the wound. We may never receive an apology from that person. We may never be able to really be in a full relationship with that person who has hurt us.

Even God, the Great Reconciler, does not force people to be in full relationship with Him. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Jesus was betrayed by His closest friends. He underwent torture and shame and death for our forgiveness but not everyone will receive that forgiveness. Not everyone will be reconciled. Still, we are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation as if God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on God's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The first step of that reconciliation is opening up our hands and letting go of our bitterness and our woundedness and receiving forgiveness from God. Then, if we have truly received that forgiveness from God, how can we not make the decision to begin the process and pass that on to someone else?

I want to end with a story that many of you probably already know of a girl who, at an incredibly young age, made a decision to forgive and she kept on with that process of forgiving. In 1960 Ruby Bridges, a 6-year-old, African-American child in New Orleans, was sent to integrate a school that had previously been all white. For many months Ruby was the only child in her classroom as none of the white children would attend school with her. Even the teacher who

taught her had to be forced to teach her with the penalty of losing her pension if she did not do it. Every day Ruby had to be escorted into the school building by Federal Marshals while white people yelled hateful things at her, called her names, shook their fists, and told her they would kill her. She was just 6 years old.

A psychiatrist named Robert Coles was doing research at the time on how children handle trauma and he got permission to interview Ruby's parents and then Ruby herself. What he heard surprised him. Both Ruby and her parents continually assured Dr. Coles that she was doing just fine. She slept well. She had a good appetite. She played after school with her neighborhood friends and she didn't seem particularly upset. Of course, Dr. Coles was a skeptical academic. He remained unconvinced so he kept up all these interviews and finally decided to talk with her teacher. I'm going to read to you about what Robert Coles said in a speech about this research.

"One day the school teacher said to me, 'I saw Ruby talking to those people on the street this morning. Every morning at 8 o'clock, there were about 50 people waiting for her to scream things at her and every afternoon another 50 or 75.' After hearing the teacher's observations, I asked Ruby, 'Did I see you talking to those people?' Ruby said, 'Well, no, I wasn't talking to them.' 'But I saw you stop for a moment and I thought I saw your lips moving.' She said, 'Oh, I was praying for them.' 'You were praying for them?' 'Oh, yes,' said Ruby.

"Once a couple of weeks after the first time I mentioned it, I asked her about this praying again. 'Why do you think you should be the one to pray for such people, given what they do to you twice a day, five days a week?' Ruby then said, 'Well, especially, it should be me.' I said, 'Why you especially?' She answered, 'Because if you are going through what they are doing to you, you are the one who should be praying for them.' And then she quoted to me what she had heard in church that Sunday from the minister. He said that Jesus went through a lot of trouble and He said about the people who were causing this trouble, 'Forgive them because they don't know what they are doing.'"

Friends, there are few things closer to God's heart than forgiveness. After all, He was willing to come to earth and to die for us so that we might experience forgiveness. So if you are struggling with forgiving someone today, begin by deciding that you *want* to forgive. Let's begin by telling God. I am going to lead you in a guided prayer where I will say a few things in the prayer and then leave a moment of quiet, a little bit of silence, for you in your heart to finish the prayer. Let us pray.

Lord God, we acknowledge that forgiveness is at the heart of whom You are. You are the Lord of Lords, compassionate and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Lord, You came to us in Jesus to show us Your love and compassion. You put Yourself at our mercy, and we betrayed and killed You, and still You forgive us. We take a moment, Lord, to thank You for Your example of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. [pause for personal reflection] Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*