

1 Sermon, March 10, 2013

Texts: Matthew 18:21-35, Luke 17:1-4

Title: "Why Christianity is Odd: Forgiveness"

The story goes that the preacher's Sunday sermon was Forgive Your Enemies. Toward the end of the service, He asked his congregation, "how many of you have forgiven their enemies"? About half held up their hands. He then repeated his question. As it was past lunchtime, this time about 80 percent held up their hands. He then repeated his question again. All responded, except one small elderly lady.

"Mrs. Jones?" inquired the preacher, Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?

"I don't have any." she replied. smiling sweetly. "Mrs. Jones, That is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety-three," she replied.

"Oh Mrs. Jones, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please come down in front of this congregation and tell us all how a person can live ninety-three years and not have an enemy in the world." The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said "I outlived them all."

That's not a true story, but I'll tell you three brief stories that all happened to people I've known.

Two boys ages 3 or 4 lived next door. They played together in the back yard of one of them. In the course of their play, they compared the parts of their anatomy you don't usually show to other people.

The mother next door to the incident was horrified. She would not let her son play with the neighbor again. More than fifteen years later, she still hasn't forgiven her neighbor – and doesn't even say hello to the neighbor.

An older couple were married and loved each other. It was his third marriage and her second. But her children couldn't get along with him. Yes, he was cranky and opinionated. When the woman died, the children took over all funeral arrangements, ignoring his wishes. Later, they cut off relations with him. When he ordered out a stone to be placed on her grave, her family didn't contact him. Instead, they complained to the cemetery, and the man received a letter from the cemetery giving him 30 days to remove the stone.

A family with eight children had a dispute in the settlement of their parents estate. The children formed up into hostile camps that would not

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talk to one another. Some 30 years later, they still would not talk to one another, and many of them were in their 80s.

These are true stories about people I have known. They were people who had good senses of humor, and with whom you could have a very pleasant conversation. But they harbored this dark side of unforgiveness in themselves.

They could not bring themselves to let go of the past.

Unforgiveness is one of the few specific things that Jesus said were reasons for you to not go to heaven. At the end of the parable from Matthew, after Jesus says that the unforgiving servant is arrested and tortured, Jesus closes with the statement: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The Lord's Prayer tells us "forgive us our sins, as we forgive the ones who sin against us."

God's forgiveness of us is dependent upon our forgiveness of others.

So, if it's so clearly what God wants, why is it so hard for people to forgive? What makes people get stuck in unforgiveness?

Do we think that it gives us more power?

Do we say, "I'm right and I won't let go."?

Do we say, "If I stick to my guns, they won't get me again."?

Are we afraid of vulnerability?

Do we say, "I just don't want to get hurt again."?

Is it the culture?

Revenge is a much stronger emphasis in some cultures.

Is it just human nature?

You can certainly make a case that forgiveness is just not natural. In our sinful, competitive natures, we want to win at all costs. If we forgive, it means we've lost. Or at least so goes the thinking.

But I think that when we forgive, we've won something important. We've won over our own temptations toward bitterness, stubbornness and vengeance.

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One of the reasons that it's hard to forgive is that we have to face reality if we forgive.

I heard the quote:

"Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having a better past."
(repeat)

Jesus said, "If another disciple sins, **rebuke the offender**, and if they repent, forgive them.

"Rebuke" is not a word we normally use. It means to express disapproval because of someone's behavior or actions.

Another translation says:

If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them.

Still another translation reads:

Correct any followers of mine who sin, and forgive the ones who say they are sorry.

Here's an important point. Forgiveness doesn't mean approval of what someone else did. Instead, it means letting go of bad feelings about what they did.

Jesus was ahead of his time when he urged forgiveness. It was a radical idea.

Still today in the Egypt, Jordan and among Palestinians, there is little forgiveness of certain acts. If a woman is raped, she is often killed because she has violated the honor of the family.

In some places in the Muslim world, the hands of a thief are still cut off. No forgiveness there.

So you can see how radical Jesus' idea of forgiveness was, and still is in some parts of the world.

In other parts of the world, Jesus' ideas about forgiveness have been embraced by secular therapists. "Forgiveness Therapy" is seen as on the cutting edge.

In a 2006 study at the University of Wisconsin, forgiveness therapy was contrasted to a combination of anger validation, assertiveness and interpersonal skill building, among a group of women who had been

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abused by their husbands but had been separated more than two years. Participants in Forgiveness therapy experienced significantly greater improvement in depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, self-esteem, and finding meaning in suffering, with gains maintained at follow-up.

There are many books now dedicated to forgiveness therapy. It's really no surprise to me that the ideas of Jesus would come to be embraced by professional healers.

Forgiveness can be hard, and forgiveness is a process, rather than an event. Forgiveness takes time. But let me share with you a couple of stories about the blessings that forgiveness can bring.

Brima Koker is a man from Sierra Leone who was caught up in the civil war there. He writes:

Some of us did not really want to join the rebels but they harassed us and then attacked us. So I realized that to resist the tide would be foolish. But in joining the rebels, I had to turn against my own family. I have a brother named Vafi, who was the proud owner of two concrete houses in Nyandehun. I take full responsibility for what happened to those houses. I burnt them down so there was nothing left but rubble.

Many things happened during this war; we went to many places and I saw many terrible things.

When I came back, of course all was not well between my brother Vafi and me.

But when a peacemaking organization came to investigate conflicts in our community and to promote forgiveness and reconciliation, we all went to the open field at the bazaar to see whether we could reconcile. I was standing some distance away from Vafi; he wouldn't even turn in my direction.

Then I went up to him directly and asked for his forgiveness. I told him that everything that happened was due to the war and I prayed that he would find it in his heart to forgive me.

I am pleased that my brother has come to forgive me. Today I thank God for our relationship. We now laugh and have fun together. Our relationship is very good now. In fact I can say there is love between me

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and him, and not only him but also all of the other members of his family. I now visit their household and spend time with all of them.

Another true story:

Victoria Ruvolo lives in New York state. In November 2004 six teenagers bought a 20 pound turkey with a stolen credit card. While driving, 18 year-old Ryan Cushing threw the frozen bird out the back window just for a thrill. The turkey hit Victoria Ruvolo's car, shattering the windshield and smashed into her face. Every single bone in her face was broken. She had ten hours of surgery and four titanium plates in her cheeks, and wire mesh holding her left eye in place because her left eye socket was so badly shattered.

She writes:

The District Attorney informed me that the overwhelming evidence was enough to put Ryan in jail for 25 years. It was at this point that I started asking questions about Ryan. I wanted to know what type of kid would do this? Was he always hurting other people? What could possibly have built up inside him so bad that he had to throw something so hard?

Because I'd experienced the death of two brothers when I was much younger, I felt strongly that I didn't want be responsible for taking this other young person's life. I didn't want Ryan to rot in jail.

That's when I asked to meet with Ryan's lawyer to be able to tell him that I wanted an amnesty for Ryan or at least a lesser sentence.

Once the case was over and it was time for him to walk out, Ryan started veering over towards where I was sitting and every court officer was ready to jump on him. They had no idea why he was coming towards me but as he walked over to where I was sitting and stood in front of me, I saw that all he was doing was crying, crying profusely. He looked at me and said, 'I never meant this to happen to you, I prayed for you every day. I'm so glad you're doing well.' Then this motherly instinct just came over me and all I could do was take him and cuddle him like a child and tell him 'just do something good with your life, take this experience and do something good with your life.'

Because I asked for amnesty for Ryan, he received a six-month prison sentence with five years probation of community service and psychiatric help. Some people couldn't understand why I'd done this but

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I felt God had given me a second chance and I wanted to pass it on. I know I did the right thing.

"Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'"

Matthew 18:21-35, NRSV.

"Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, **you must rebuke the offender**, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive.'"

Luke 17:1-4, NRSV.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Things that cause people to trip and fall into sin must happen, but how terrible it is for the person through whom they happen. It would be better for them to be thrown into a lake with a large stone hung around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to trip and fall into sin. Watch yourselves! If your brother or sister sins, **warn them to stop**. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them. Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I

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am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person." Luke 17:1-4, [Common English Bible \(CEB\)](#)

Jesus said to his disciples:

There will always be something that causes people to sin. But anyone who causes them to sin is in for trouble. A person who causes even one of my little followers to sin would be better off thrown into the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their neck. So be careful what you do.

Correct any followers of mine who sin, and forgive the ones who say they are sorry. Even if one of them mistreats you seven times in one day and says, "I am sorry," you should still forgive that person. Luke 17:1-4, Contemporary English Version