

## FORGIVENESS

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“Increase our faith!” the disciples say. Why do they say this? To find out, we need to look at the verses of Scripture that immediately precede the passage we have as today’s gospel.

Here they are: “Jesus said, ‘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.”

It is to this mandate that the disciples respond, “Increase our faith!” In other words, they say, “No way we can see ourselves being able to forgive like that. We just can’t do it.”

And so today’s gospel is about forgiveness.

To forgive is to release someone from punishment without harboring resentment against them. To release someone from punishment (including the kind of punishment you can inflict on someone in the privacy of your own mind) without harboring resentment. Given what life brings to us – unkindness’s, betrayals, and broken relationships of every order of magnitude – forgiveness is difficult for all of us, impossible for some. I think one of the reasons it’s so hard is that we, like the disciples, misunderstand it. We think forgiveness requires getting something we don’t already have - more faith, stronger belief. I don’t think it works that way.

Each of us carries within us an image of God – a visual image, perhaps, but also an image of the way God works. How do you understand God in terms of forgiveness? Do you see God as a kind of storehouse of pardon? Do you imagine Him as a dispenser of forgiveness from whom you beg a dose when you need it, either for yourself or others? I think deep down it is all too easy for us to think of God in this way, which reduces God to a kind of sadistic tyrant who holds all the cards and who will deal with us mercifully only if we beg hard enough and show that we are worthy of it. This creates a great distance between us and God and it makes a great struggle of the spiritual life.

Scripture gives us a very different picture of God and forgiveness. The first time the word “forgive” appears in the Bible is early on, in Genesis, in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was badly sinned against by his brothers in their youth. They beat him and sold him down the river into slavery in Egypt and they lie to their father Jacob about what has happened to him, thereby creating a nasty set of family memories that course through the family bloodstream for years. Even though they eventually reconcile many years later, after their father’s death the brothers fear that without Jacob to protect them, Joseph might be still bearing a grudge and planning to enjoy the pleasure of delayed revenge.

And so again they ask his forgiveness for what they had done to him long ago. The Bible says: “Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell

down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.'" With those words, Joseph set his brothers free from the past.

So forgiveness is not something God keeps in His pocket. It is not something God doles out because His creatures are afraid of His wrath and He sometimes feels like letting them off the hook. Rather, forgiveness is the air God breathes. It is in Him and around Him. In a sense, forgiveness **is** God. From the very beginning of the Bible, which shows us that the moral life of the universe tends toward goodness because, as Joseph said, God intends it to, we see that forgiveness is in the atmosphere. It is always there, needing only to be received.

What keeps us from receiving it and giving it? Certainly, there is a delicious, addicting quality to a nursed resentment or a held grudge. I have felt it and you have felt it. Unforgiveness allows you to feel that you are better than the person who has hurt you. It helps you overlook your own sins. And there is something darkly exciting about maintaining the fantasy that what has been done to you may be uniquely evil. Unforgiveness is a safe little port in which to harbor your anger and grief, and so it gives you a way to shrink the world down to the size of your moral imagination. It's a little place to live, within your firm sense of having been wronged. Some people spend their whole lives in this place of unfreedom.

The most unforgiving, bitter, and punishing people on earth – and many of them are church-goers – are people who believe that if other people were behaving the way they should and doing things the way they should – by which they usually mean, **their** way –

then the world would be a better place and there would be a lot less to forgive. These people delight in defining others by their worst mistakes. They rejoice in the wrongs of others and are disappointed when so-called bad people do something good for a change. To these people the Bible says, "Are you in the place of God?"

But there is something deeper in us, something more profoundly distorted, that is served by the refusal to forgive, and that is our basic unwillingness to assent to the world as it is. One of the reasons I loved teaching the Bible to third graders at Grace Church School in Manhattan is that the kids were so young and they had so little experience of life that they could quickly see through to the truth of the stories. Kids would always observe how quickly the Biblical story slides downhill. Creation – great story. Adam and Eve and the serpent – not so good. Cain and Abel – yikes, really bad. The Flood – complete disaster. Plus, lots of weird sex and violence along the way. As a little boy once said, "Do our parents know we are reading this book?"

Scripture gives us the world as it really is: deeply flawed. When Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you," he meant to say that the world will always be deeply flawed. He didn't mean the needs of the poor shouldn't be addressed. But he did mean that the history of this world will not be redeemed fully until He comes again, in the next age. The world will remain deeply flawed. Every single one of us will always be deeply flawed. Nothing is ever going to be perfect. Not even in a town with the immensely positive name of "New Canaan," which means the "new Promised Land."

Given that reality, forgiveness is an essential survival tool. It's the only way we can help God keep the world spinning as He slowly

and invisibly transforms the world in love. As I get older, it's been helpful to me, in my own struggle to forgive, to keep reminding myself that most people are doing the best they can most of the time. **Most** people are doing the best **they** can **most** of the time. Maybe they are not doing the best you can (or think you can). But they are doing the best they can – sometimes even when they are in the midst of wronging you. I find that covers a multitude of sins.

I also find it helpful to remember Jesus, who shines through everything, even the worst sins. Because he's the one who showed us that the moral fulcrum of the world does not rest on the balance between innocence and guilt, as we are so apt to think it does. Life is not about who is right and who is wrong. Not one of us is ever going to be completely innocent. That ended a long time ago, after the Fall, when God stationed the angel with the flaming sword to guard the Garden of Eden after he sent Adam and Eve out into the real world. We cannot go back to that place, not in this life. We see glimpses of that lost innocence, sometimes. And we will return to it, when we return to the heart of God. But we are only guilty, to some degree of another, in this life. We are only human. But because we are made in the image of God, we are also capable of great moral generosity. We're not just highly evolved animals.

The moral fulcrum of this world rests on what Jesus did on the cross, which was to reconcile God's justice (which will always condemn us to some degree, since we are not perfect) with God's mercy (which tends toward leniency). With Jesus' last expiring breath, the inner life of God – that is, forgiveness – was released upon the world. And so Jesus set us free. As St. Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free."

I want to leave you with the image of Jesus on the cross. On either side of him, also hanging on a cross, was a man, both of them sinners and (I imagine) also sinned against. Each was suffering the penalty of a world that believed that forgiveness is for fools and that condemnation is the only remedy for sin. One man, sensing the forgiveness that is all around him in the presence of Jesus, says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus, seeing that he has opened his heart to forgiveness, says to him, "Of course. This day you will be with me in Paradise." This man we call "the good thief." The other man says nothing. In our ignorance of the incredible moral generosity with which God runs the universe, we call this man "the bad thief."

I don't think so. I think the first man shows us the graciousness of God, how eager God is to grant forgiveness to anyone who asks for it. And the second man, the one who does not speak? Nowhere does the Scripture say he was condemned by God. He is the silent one, the one who is thinking about what his answer to Jesus will be. He is you and me. And so the story of Jesus' work on the cross ends in this marvelously open-ended way. It runs right out from the page into real life, as this man thinks about what he will do. Will he open his heart to forgiveness, or not?

And you...what will you do? We live in an unforgiving world. When it comes to forgiveness, the human heart is always in conflict with itself. It's never going to be easy. Will you open your heart to Jesus' forgiveness...or not?

Amen.