

Why Forgive?

A Sermon on Matthew 18:21-35 by Rich Holmes

Delivered on September 17, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

From the time that I was eleven years old, back in December of 1983, I have a vivid memory. It is a memory of my father showing me a picture in the newspaper of two men. One man was famous and could be recognized by anyone in the world and the other man was someone I didn't recognize at all. The first man was Pope John Paul II and the second man was named Mehmet Ali Agca. Now, Mehmet Ali Agca does not have a name that you would instantly recognize, but he had tried to assassinate the pope two and a half years earlier by firing two bullets into his abdomen. The pope narrowly escaped death from this attack and had to undergo five hours of surgery to save his life. But here was a picture of the pope visiting his would be assassin in prison and to this day, more than thirty years later, I can't think about the word forgiveness without seeing this picture in my mind's eye.

I don't remember what words my father said to me when he showed me this picture back when I was eleven. But what he said to me is not as important as the fact that by showing me this picture, he was teaching me to value what the pope was doing in this picture. By showing me this picture, he was teaching me that what the pope was doing in this picture was in his opinion, good, and right, and noble. He was teaching me that forgiveness was a virtue that he valued and was a virtue which he hoped that I would come to value as well.

I think that there are some people, however, who do not see forgiveness as a virtue, but as a vice. They would tell you that anyone who would forgive a wrong done to them too easily must be someone who doesn't think much of themselves. Those who forgive too easily, they would tell you, are the kind of people who would tell you it's perfectly alright to step on them

and push them around because they aren't very important. Now, those who say this would probably agree that there are some things anyone should forgive of course, like having their name mispronounced or having their birthday forgotten, but there are some wrongs that are so heinous that they should never be forgiven. Well, I believe that forgiveness is a virtue, in fact, it is one of the greatest of Christian virtues, but in order to convince you of this, I want to say three things about forgiveness.

The first thing I want to say is that while an act of forgiveness at times may seem like an act of surrender to those who have wronged us, no one who has wronged us ever has a right to demand that we forgive them. Only God has a right to demand that we forgive. In our gospel lesson for today, Peter asks Jesus if my brother sins against me how many times should I forgive him, and he asks Jesus, Lord, is it as many as seven times? And Jesus answers not seven, but seventy times seven. But only Christ, who has never wronged us, has a right to demand that we forgive others for their wrongs. No one who has wronged you, however, can put themselves in the place of God by making such a demand. They can ask for forgiveness, they can plead for forgiveness, but they have no right to demand forgiveness. And notice that Jesus doesn't say that they have a right to demand forgiveness. What he does say in fact is that if you go to present your gift at the altar and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, first go and be reconciled with them and then come and offer your gift. He didn't say if your brother or sister has something against you tell them to get over it, it's their problem, come and bring your gift anyway. No. He says it is your problem, go and be reconciled with them and then come and offer your gift. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German theologian who gave his life resisting Hitler famously wrote a book that sits in my office titled

The Cost of Discipleship. If you've never read it, the book is essentially a treatise on the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer wrote, means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Costly grace, on the other hand, is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of which a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price for which in order to buy, the merchant will sell all his goods; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. If forgiveness which it is possible for us to demand is not an example of cheap grace, then I don't know what is. (p.45) Forgiveness which we can demand is forgiveness that doesn't mean anything, it is forgiveness that can be taken for granted, and forgiveness which doesn't require any response of thanks. I don't think that anyone who hears Bonhoeffer's words could possibly deny that forgiveness which we could demand from God would be the perfect example of cheap grace. But if it is possible to expect cheap grace from God, it is just as possible to expect cheap grace from each other. No one has any more of a right to demand that you forgive whatever wrongs they have done to you than they have a right to demand that God forgive them for whatever wrongs they have done to God. Only God can demand that we forgive. The rest of us can only ask for it and plead for it.

The second thing I would like to say is that not only does anyone who has wronged you not have a right to demand forgiveness from you, but an act of forgiveness does not say that a great wrong has not been done. You may think that people who forgive too easily are those who don't care when wrongs are done to them. But the funny thing is that if you never cared if a wrong was ever done to you there would be nothing to forgive. There can only be real forgiveness when there is genuine hurt, genuine pain, and the acknowledgment that a wrong

really has been done. But of course if there is genuine hurt and pain and the acknowledgement of a real wrong, then this raises the question, how is forgiveness possible?

Well, as we continue to look at our gospel lesson for today, we realize that forgiveness only becomes possible when we start with our own forgiveness from God. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells the story about a slave who owes a king ten thousand talents and Jesus says that because he could not pay, the king ordered that he be sold along with his wife and children and all his possessions. So the slave got on his knees, Jesus says, and he begged the king for forgiveness saying have patience with me and I will pay you everything, and so the king took pity on him and forgave the entire debt. But when the slave ran into one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, the slave seized him by the throat and said pay what you owe. This fellow slave also pleaded with him and said have patience with me and I will repay you. But the first slave, the one who was forgiven the debt of ten thousand talents refused to forgive this debt of a hundred denarii and he threw his fellow slave into prison until he could repay. Now, because we measure our debts in dollars and cents and not talents and denarii, what you probably don't know from hearing this story is that what the first slave owed was six hundred thousand times what the second slave owed. But after having this enormous debt forgiven by the king, this slave refused to forgive a debt that was one six hundred thousandth the size of the debt that he owed.

Forgiveness does not mean that a great wrong has not been done, but if we reflect on this story then I think we learn that forgiveness is possible when we realize that whatever we have to forgive someone else is nothing compared to what God has to forgive us for. On the cross of Jesus Christ God wipes away the sin of everything we have ever done or everything we

ever could do. So how can we, knowing that such an enormous debt has been forgiven of us, ever refuse to forgive our neighbor for whatever our neighbor might have done? You know, I think it's a good idea from time to time to take out a list and start writing down all the things you've done wrong from the least to the greatest. You say well, I can't remember all the things I've ever done wrong. Well, that's why you need the list. Start writing it down every time you do something wrong. I mean every time. And then when you see how long the list gets after a month or after a year, and you realize that God has forgiven all of this, and then you consider how long the list would be if it weren't just for the past month but an entire lifetime, then and perhaps only then can you find that it is much easier to forgive anybody whatever they might have done to you.

The third and final thing I want to say today about forgiveness is that not only do we find the power to forgive when we know that God has forgiven us, but sometimes when we think we need to forgive others, actually the person we need to forgive is ourselves. You know, sometimes it is much easier to recognize that a problem exists than it is to recognize what's causing the problem. For thousands of years people recognized that the disease malaria was making people sick and killing them in the swamps and tropical parts of the world before they had any idea what was causing it. In fact do you know what the word malaria means? It means bad air, because the ancient Romans thought that bad tropical air is what caused people to be infected with malaria. It was not until the late nineteenth century that they actually discovered that malaria was caused by bites from the female Anopheles mosquito. Well, in the same way, I think that we can often know that we need to forgive someone without knowing who it is that we need to forgive and that we actually need to forgive ourselves.

I remember a story once about a woman named Jan who spent so many years hating a man who murdered her only child. Her hatred of the man who victimized her child absolutely consumed her. The man was arrested, tried and convicted and he received life in prison but even if he'd gotten the death penalty that wouldn't have been enough for Jan. She wanted to get her hands on him so she could torture him day and night. She was filled with rage, anger and a thirst for revenge. I don't blame Jan for feeling this way. As a parent I could understand any parent feeling this way. But amid all this hatred suddenly one day Jan woke up and she realized that it wasn't the guy that was sitting behind bars that she really hated and that she had to forgive. The person she had to forgive was the person staring back at her in the mirror. She had to forgive herself for failing to protect her only child. Throughout all this time, she was making the man behind bars the object of her rage when in fact she was enraged with herself because she blamed herself for the death of her child. But when she finally accepted that what happened to her child wasn't her fault, it was the fault of the man that was sitting in prison, she found that she was free to forgive him. And such forgiveness did not mean that Jan thought her child's killer should get out of prison, it didn't mean that she would ever trust him or any such foolishness like that. It simply meant, first, that she would no longer allow him to rob her life of happiness and joy and second, it meant that while maybe never feeling any affection for him she could at least pity him because she also saw him as a victim. Not a victim in the same way that her child was a victim, of course. But a victim of a warped mind, and a victim of a warped heart.

One of the things we teach children from the time they are very young in the church is that God is all powerful and almighty. What we call omnipotent if we are to use those grown up

adult words. And so, in our creeds we say things like “I believe in God the Father, *Almighty* Maker of heaven and earth.” And in our hymns we say “I Sing the Mighty *Power* of God that made the mountains rise.” But what does it mean to be almighty and powerful? We might think of power as the power of a sword. The power of a dictator to control people and to be able to force them to do things like make all the trains run on time. The power which comes out of the ability to threaten, and to humiliate. But the power of Christ is the power which from the agony of the cross declared Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing. That’s not the way we think of power. You wouldn’t think of the dictators of this world who hold absolute political power in their hand as ever forgiving someone who would crucify them. Hitler wouldn’t have done that. Stalin wouldn’t have done that. Pol Pot, Mussolini, not one of the so-called all powerful dictators of this world would do such a thing. But anyone who practices the virtue of forgiveness is mightier and more powerful than anyone who does not.

Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength. It does not say that a wrong has not been done because there can be no forgiveness without something to forgive. It cannot be demanded of us by those who need it because forgiveness that can be so demanded is cheap. And it begins not by denying our self-worth and surrendering to someone else, but by remembering that we are forgiven and even discovering that we forgive ourselves.