

Sermon, *Possibly, Consider Forgiving*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels by the Sea, 3.2.25

This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, 2025. Our Gospel lesson is from Luke and it is about the “transfiguration of Jesus”. The Transfiguration is in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Luke’s version has some differences from Matthew/Mark. In particular, Mathew/Mark said Jesus “metamorphooed” (written in Greek). You’ve probably heard the word “morph” as in something changed; morphed into something different. Same with metamorphosis. Metamorphoo is like that. But, Luke, who knew that word, and perhaps had Mark and Matthew’s Gospels with him, instead wrote that Jesus’s face altered. Luke is focusing on the intimate – Jesus’s face.

I’ve seen change in people’s faces. And no, I am not talking about plastic surgery. When someone is forgiven, or forgives, I can see it in their face. Like a lamp that shines, I can see it when people are full of joy, of life, and are happy. Likewise with forgiveness. I think Luke is telling us that Jesus was on the mountain and talked with Moses and Elijah about his “departure” (exodus) in Jerusalem. And, his face altered. I think there is a connection with forgiveness, Jesus, and this story of the transfiguration. After the mountain top experience, Jesus headed straight to Jerusalem for his final Passover. That part of the story ends, with Jesus hanging on the cross, saying these the last words: “Father, forgive them.” Perhaps, the energy and insight required to do that started with this transfiguration and Jesus’s face altering.

What does that say to us about forgiveness?

You may have heard someone, or yourself, say this: I can never forgive myself/someone else. Prior to ministry and certainly in ministry, I have heard people say that. “I can never forgive...” My answer is this: you are right, you cannot forgive. If you say that you cannot forgive then you cannot. I do not have a magic wand that would change it. I have no special words, in English or in Greek, that can change someone who said, “I cannot forgive.” It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But, if someone said, “Maybe, one day, some time in the future, I could see myself beginning to, possibly, consider forgiving...” Now that’s something entirely different! Just that small little crack of possibly considering forgiving, that’s all that God needs. Believe it or not, there is a world of difference between “I cannot” and “possibly, one day in the future, I could think about considering...”

Forgiveness is something that you can give someone whether they deserve it or not; receive it or not; is alive, or not. It is something that you give to someone else. When Jesus said, “Father, forgive them,” it had nothing at all to do with anyone there receiving and accepting his forgiveness. It is something that he needed to say. For us, our souls need to say it – forgiving is a gift that helps us unburden ourselves from something we did or something someone else did. It frees us.

Proverbs 26:11, “As the dog returns to its vomit, so does a fool return to his folly.” This is the first rule of forgiveness – you can offer forgiveness once the dog no longer returns to its vomit (sorry for the graphic language, but, it makes a point). If someone is still hurting you, or, if you

are still hurting yourself, forgiveness is not in the mix yet. Forgiveness can be given after the fool no longer returns to his folly. In other words, that person, or yourself, can no longer be hurting you. That's step one. If you need to forgive someone who is and will still hurt you, that is something different. Please contact me directly if you are in that situation. So, step one, they can't hurt you again. Or, you have made the decision to stop doing what is hurting yourself.

Step two – possibly considering sometime in the future that you could look at forgiving. Step three – forgiving and then having your life shine with light and glory (like Jesus on that mountain top).

There is a guy, Doug, who has given me permission to share his story, “If it can help someone else with forgiving themselves.” Years ago, he rearended a white minivan on a freeway offramp. He looked down to adjust the radio (back when we listened to FM radio stations and they'd drift in and out) and whammo, he rearended the van. It had two car seats in it. One was empty, the other held a small child. Doug told me this story in my office because he needed to find a way to forgive himself for the accident. I told him I worked for an insurance company prior to seminary and that we call them “accidents” and not “intentionals” for a reason. It was an accident. He said, “Yeah, well, I was drunk when I caused the accident.”

We talked about his sobriety and how that was the last day he spent without being in a recovery program. He has been working his program and now, ten years later, has been helping others along the way too. (Step one, he is no longer hurting himself.) He told me he is bringing up the accident because his insurance company is going to close the claim. They kept it open for a decade to see if there was any sort of injury with the development of the child in the car seat. He said he wanted to talk to the driver he hit as he thought it would help. Through his insurance adjuster, his phone number was passed to the claimant.

A few days later, she called him. He said that he was very sorry for rearending her car and he thinks about that accident every day and that he is sorry if it has hurt her or ruined her life. She said, “Honestly, I have not thought about this accident at all until I got a surprise letter from your insurance company. My car was repaired; later we sold it, bought another one and probably another one after that. No, we're doing fine.” Here Doug thought that she was having a rough time, like he did, and was surprised, and relieved, to find out she had not thought about it at all. He began the process of forgiving himself – which now includes beating himself up over the past ten years for thinking he ruined someone else's life when clearly, he had not.

Doug is now in the place of saying that the accident was one of the best things that has happened to him. It completely changed his life and, for the person he rearended, it didn't change their life much at all. When he talks about it, his face lights up. You can see and feel the forgiveness he has for himself and how it has changed his life.

When we consider, possibly, the idea of forgiveness, we take a big leap into the gift for ourselves of forgiveness and the light that shines through us as a result that lights up the whole world. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.