

The Journey of Forgiveness

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr on the 10th anniversary of 9-11
Peace UCC, Greensboro NC

September 11, 2001. By the time the eleven o'clock hour came around on that gorgeous autumn day the second tower of the World Trade Center had already collapsed and the country knew that something out of the ordinary was happening. Ten years later and to the day what does the lectionary ask of me, but to preach on Jesus' words on forgiveness: *I ask that you not forgive seven times, but seventy times seven.* Forgiveness? Today? Really?

However, unlike most, when I hear about forgiveness on September 11, my mind considers not Osama Bin Laden or terrorists, but rather an individual who used to be a good friend. Ten years ago this morning I was watching both Zephany and Zak and her children as well. After seeing a couple of early clients at the pastoral counseling center where we worked together, she burst into my home around 10:30 a.m. to tell me that New York City, the place I once called home, was under attack. And then,... ... And then a little less than two years later, that same friend publicly stated that I was a danger to my clients. She offered no evidence. She simply made the statement at a staff meeting and then refused to engage me any further. One day our children are growing up together and we're having barbecues in each other's backyards. The next day,... well let's just say that there are very few people who have hurt me as much as she did.

So have I forgiven her? I don't know. I think so. Maybe. At the very least I've made progress. I think the process was well underway when I learned to stop picking at that wound all the time. Of course it took me a while to get there. And then there came a day when I still hurt but I didn't have to hate her while I hurt. That was real progress. Today, I rarely think of those days anymore, not because I need to deny it but because I really have moved on with my life. I'm scarred but my scars don't keep me from living.

So, would I trust her again?... Honestly? Probably not. So does that mean I haven't forgiven her, or does it mean that the two of us are not reconciled? Is forgiveness the same as reconciliation? I don't think so, but I don't know. There is so much I don't know when it comes to forgiveness. I do know a couple of weeks ago I had an extended on-line conversation about the nature of forgiveness with an atheist, a Jewish convert, and a woman studying for the Christian ministry. Between the four of us we have enough graduate degrees to wallpaper a small house. And yet, despite all of that knowledge we were still looking through the glass but dimly when it came to forgiveness.

I love Eugene Patterson's translation: So you think you should forgive 7 times? Hardly! Try 70 times 7. So who would like to go up to Ground Zero and use those words today? Yeah. That's what I thought. I'm not convinced that audience would want to hear those words. But then again, Jesus' audience didn't want to hear these words either. They were citizens of the honor / shame culture of the first century near east. Not only would it have been socially accepted in Jesus' culture to retaliate against those who defamed or injured your family, it would have been expected. A family or a son who did not retaliate would have been shamed. Forgiveness would have been unheard of in those times. Considering Jewish-Palestinian relationships these days, it still is.

So one of two things is true here folks: either Jesus is saying this because he doesn't live in the real world which would by definition make him psychotic, or, he knows we need to hear these words. So assuming the latter is true, why do we need to hear them? Well, maybe Jesus asks us to forgive seventy times seven because he knows we won't get it right the first 489 times. I also suspect that he knows something of our proclivity to use ink when writing in our grudge books. More importantly however, I think Jesus knows there are some hurts that just aren't easily or neatly

healed. You see forgiveness is not so much for the ones who hurt us as it is for we who have been hurt.

Have you ever heard the phrase “Where two or three are gathered in my name I will be there amongst them.” Isn’t that nice and sweet? Here’s the thing. That phrase is from Matthew 18 in the verses immediately before today’s lesson. But Jesus isn’t saying that he will be present where two or three are gathered singing Kum Ba Yah. No. Jesus is saying he will be present whenever even two or three people are doing the hard work of being in community while confronting and forgiving. In other words, Jesus words about forgiveness are only uttered after he has spoken of the need to confront those who have offended and hurt. Forgiveness is not about saying, “Aw, it was nothing.” Forgiveness is not about saying, “You need to forgive your brother because you know he didn’t mean anything by it.” No. Forgiveness is about confronting those who hurt you in such a deep way that you can’t forget. Forgiving does not mean that offenders are not to be held accountable. Forgiveness is not about excusing nor is it about minimizing.

So if forgiveness is not about excusing or minimizing, then what is it? Well for one, it’s a process, not an event or a destination. The late Lewis Smedes of Fuller Theological Seminary said that forgiveness is a journey that happens over at least 3 stages:

- 1) We hurt
- 2) We hate
- 3) We heal

Stage 1 - We hurt

The road to forgiveness starts with the recognition that we have been hurt. That’s why forgiveness isn’t forgetting. Forgiveness is not needed for trivial wounds that are easily forgotten. Forgiveness is for those personal, unfair and deep pains that cannot be readily forgotten. We would never ignore deep physical wounds, yet we regularly attempt to avoid and deny emotional and psychological wounds as if they were nothing. So forgiveness starts by recognizing that those wounds are something, that we have been hurt, perhaps deeply, and that something has been taken away. We are owed a debt.

Stage 2 - We hate.

It may sound strange to put the words Christian and hate together, but ignoring the reality of our hate won’t help us. In fact it may do just the opposite. Besides hate is natural. When we hate someone, we are pushing them away from us which is how we protect ourselves from getting hurt again. Where we get ourselves into trouble is not in hating or experiencing anger but in staying stuck in our anger and our hate. Smedes says that when we stay stuck in this stage, we bind ourselves, to our painful past and by fastening ourselves to the past, our hate becomes our future. Again, hate and anger are not an issue unless we stay there because there is another stage

Stage 3 - We heal

For most of my professional life as both a pastor and a counselor I have listened to the stories of sexual abuse survivors. I have listened to their pain and their righteous cries for justice. But the reality is that the abuser can never repay what was taken from them. When innocence is taken and trust shattered, the debt cannot be repaid. It is not possible. And when we spend our lives waiting for and demanding a repayment of that which is not possible our lives are wasted. Sometimes it takes the realization that our offenders can’t pay us back even if they wanted to, before we will enter the 3rd stage of healing; before we search for a balm not made with human hands. You see, forgiveness really isn’t for our offenders. Their healing will necessarily involve confession, penance and repentance and then and only then does absolution become a possibility. But forgiveness is really for the victim. Forgiveness is God’s way of seeing to it that we don’t have

to live with the bitterness and the pain of what happened over and over again. Forgiveness isn't about becoming a carpet and allowing others to walk on us. Forgiveness is the way we take control of our lives and free ourselves from our painful past. If I can't figure out how to forgive my former friend, I'm the one who suffers. If I can't figure out how to forgive former congregations who have deeply hurt me, I'm the one who suffers, and my ministry. If I couldn't have figured out how to forgive my brother, my pain would be so much greater than it is.

So Peter wants to talk about numbers, limits, boundaries and Jesus will have none of it. Yeah I know some religious leaders say forgive 3 times. Yes, 7 times is extravagant, especially when compared to 3. But do you know what dude? In this life if you're only hurt 490 times, you got off lucky. And if we ever stop or forgo the process of forgiving, we condemn ourselves to live in a future of hurt and hate. Jesus never wants us to stop forgiving because he never wants us to stop living. After all, it's not like hate is going to heal you.

To name but a few things, hate has given us the crusades, the holocaust, jihad, Jim Crow laws, histrionics over a mosque in New York City, the murder of Matthew Shepherd, AND the attacks of 9-11. Yes we were hurt and deeply hurt. Yes, our American psyche has been scarred. But hating and misunderstanding Muslims is not going to restore that sense of invulnerability we lost. If anything the more we hate, the more we tie ourselves to the pain of that day, AND the more we become like the hijackers themselves. Be very careful whom you choose for your enemy because inevitably you will become more and more like them. Such is the cancer of hate. It replicates itself over and over and over.

But the way of forgiveness heals. Not instantly, not overnight, not without setbacks and outright reversals, but the journey and our willingness to wrestle with forgiveness takes us closer and closer to a day when we find healing. And yes, we will have scars, physical and psychic ones. I know I do. But my scars speak both of the pain I have suffered AND the healing I have experienced. They are reminders of how far I've come. The gospels emphasize that even after Jesus' resurrection, he was scarred. I cannot begin to tell you how important it is to me that our Lord and Savior carried scars on his person. And by his scars we are healed. And by our scars we remember that we have and we can heal.

It is perhaps inevitable that we will think of the sins of others today and the hurts they caused. Without trying to deny that reality, it might be helpful to at least consider for moment today the hurts we have caused, especially the hurts we have caused God. In the words of Frederick Buechner, God says to us, "You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us... We both may carry scars for life BUT I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend. I still want you to fulfill your calling as my child."

Forgiveness is an arduous journey, and apparently it is so for God and for us. It certainly is a journey that requires we do some wrestling like Jacob. And yes, in all likelihood we will walk away limping and it is all but guaranteed that we will walk away with scars. But so too can we walk away with a blessing. After all, we are promised that where even two or three people are doing the hard work of confronting and forgiving, they will be accompanied by a divine and healing presence. Thanks be to God for such a presence. And thanks be to God for forgiveness. Of all of God's gifts, may she not be forgotten on this 9-11 anniversary. Amen.