

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS
(1) WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FORGIVENESS?

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 6:12

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PROLOGUE

C. S. Lewis said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."

SCRIPTURE

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" {16} So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, {17} 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. {18} Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." {19} But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? {20} Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. {21} So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Genesis 50:15-21 NRSV).

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Mike Kilen from the Des Moines Register raises a vexing question:

If you are laid off, cheated on or in worse ways wronged, a real treat is to have another person say this: "Just get over it. You should be forgiving." Well, sure. Forgiveness is good for you, like Brussels sprouts, but how do you swallow all that bitterness?

Over the next few weeks we will be exploring possible answers to this question in a series entitled, "Conversations about Forgiveness." If you have never been hurt, never done anything wrong, never brought grief to a loved one, never screwed up your relationship with God, never wished you could turn back the clock then this series will mean nothing to you. If, on the other hand, you are like the rest of us and you know what it is like to despair of sin or you know first hand what it feels like to be hurt or betrayed, then there are at least three ways you can benefit from this series.

First of all, you can attend each of the Sunday services and be an active listener to the series of messages on forgiveness. Secondly, you can participate in Talkback - a new adult discussion forum that starts today at 11:15 a.m. in Fellowship Hall (located on the lower level) . Members and guests alike are invited to grab a cup of coffee and have a follow-up conversation with me on each Sunday's sermon topic. The third way you can benefit from this series is to participate in the Season of Forgiveness - a series of four afternoon meetings on the subject of forgiveness sponsored by the congregations of Second Missionary Baptist, Mt Zion AME, First Congregational, and First Presbyterian.

1. THE NEED

The concept of forgiveness presupposes a need for forgiveness. This is the situation that Joseph's brothers found themselves in as described in our reading from Genesis. Joseph was the eleventh of twelve sons of Israel (Jacob). His brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt where, in a "rags to riches" story, he became prime minister. A famine brought his brothers to Egypt and put them at his mercy.

But this was not the first time human beings needed forgiveness. The need for forgiveness began early in human history. One can imagine that Adam and Eve told their story over and over again to their children. How God had made a beautiful world, placed them in it to enjoy but they were not content with that. They wanted to be like gods themselves. So they rejected God's authority. They rebelled against him. God said that if they did that they would die. So they did die. Immediately, in a spiritual sense and some time later in a physical sense. The relationship they had with God died. The relationship of harmony they had with nature died. The beautiful relationship they had with each other died.

In a very real sense, this story is reenacted in every generation. It has become an integral part of our existence. The traditional word for this condition is "Sin." The condition of Sin is the cause for the various manifestations of Sin in the world. War, hatred, bigotry, murder, envy, selfishness, theft, adultery and gossip are just some of the symptoms of this condition. The symptoms are not equal in their seriousness, for example, murder is more heinous than envy. But all "sins" point to the condition of Sin whereby we are estranged from our Creator. The fact of Sin points to our need for forgiveness.

2. THE PRACTICE

Joseph was most definitely sinned against by his brothers. And yet, many years later, when hunger brought them into Egypt, he forgave them. Who could have blamed him if he had been angry or even vengeful? But if he was angry, he did not act on it. If he had contemplated revenge, he did not carry it out when he had the chance.

Furthermore, the way Joseph behaved demonstrates the most basic meaning of forgiveness. On a practical level this means surrendering our "right" to retaliate. Unfortunately, it is human nature to want revenge.

Two little brothers, Harry and James, had finished supper and were playing until bedtime. Somehow, Harry hit James with a stick, and tears and bitter words followed. Charges and accusations were still being exchanged as mother prepared them for bed. The mother instructed, “Now, James, before you go to bed you’re going to have to forgive your brother.” James was thoughtful for a few moments, and then he replied, “Well OK, I’ll forgive him tonight, but if I don’t die before I wake up, he’d better look out in the morning!”

We feel we have the right to hurt back when someone injures us. There are many different ways we can attempt to do this.

- We can hurt back by trying to kill or maim the person. Look around the world today. Such violent revenge is all too common.
- We can hurt back through insult. Do you remember the playground jingle, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me”? Perhaps you said it as a kid, probably after someone called you a name. But the jingle is a lie. Broken bones heal after a couple of months. A stinging criticism can continue to hurt years after it was first said.
- We can hurt back by damaging a person’s reputation through gossip and rumor. This is the preferred method of retaliation in the Church. Generally, we avoid guns and choose character assassination over coffee instead.
- We can also hurt back by trying to hold something over the other person and using that to control or manipulate the person. And if they resist our control we remind them afresh of their past offence, how much they “hurt” us.
- Even trying to force someone to apologize to you is a form of retaliation! (Oh, yes, we human beings are masters at finding ways to hurt back.)

The only way to overcome this is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a choice. Forgiveness means even though you think you have the right to hurt back, you voluntarily surrender your right to do so. You release it. In effect, you say to that other person, “I am not going to hurt you. What God or God’s delegated authority may do is another matter but I will not harm you — not with my hands and not with my mouth.” But real peace of mind does not come until we also stop imagining how we can hurt back.

When I say surrender, I mean surrender to God. There are times when we need stand up for ourselves. There are times to call attention to injustice. There are times when we need to flee from those who are hurting us. But to surrender to God means relinquishing a desire for personal vengeance. Vengeance is God’s business and not ours.

Forgiveness is not contrary to justice. If you cooperate with authorities in a robbery case where you were the victim then you are supporting the administration of justice. This is different from how you regard the person who robbed you. You can forgive that person, that is, you can give up all notion of taking personal revenge. You leave it up to God or to the impartial human authorities to whom God has given the responsibility for justice. It is not our job to retaliate!

3. THE HELP

Joseph went through many hardships while in Egypt including slavery and false imprisonment. Yet he was able to show mercy to those who had injured him. And as he did so he said:

"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, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (50:19,20).

Joseph had two powerful resources to help him forgive his brothers. First of all, he recognized the providence of God to bring good out of evil. Richard J. Fairchild comments:

Joseph was given the grace to see beyond the pain to the gain – the grace to see that while evil was done to him, God was able to use that evil for good.

Secondly, Joseph acknowledged the purpose of God in gathering a people for himself. Joseph did not stand alone. He was part of a greater community. He belonged to God's people. His connection with a community of faith helped absorb much of the bitterness and anger. One of the reasons people have such difficulty forgiving today is because they are often alone and isolated. They are not connected to a community with a greater purpose so they feel forced to defend themselves individually and it proves too much for them.

Paul tells us:

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13) .

Because we have received mercy we are to show mercy. We can forgive because we have been forgiven. Trusting in the providence of God and staying connected to God's people help make it less difficult.

CONCLUSION

But an important key to all of this is what we allow our imaginations to dwell on when we feel we are the injured party. There is a Native American tale about two wolves. A Grandfather said to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice.... "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It's like

taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. "I have struggled with these feelings many times. "It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But...the other wolf... ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. "Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit." The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" The Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."