

“The Courage to Forgive: When You Can’t Forgive”

Jeremiah 18:19-23 Luke 23:32-42

Rev. Dean Snyder

Thirty one years ago I was a young pastor just graduated from seminary serving a church. One Sunday I preached a sermon on forgiveness. It was not a very profound sermon. I just tried to say over and over again for fifteen or twenty minutes what Jesus so often said that if God graciously forgives us we ought to be gracious enough to forgive one another.

After the service one of the pillars of the church, a woman who I thought of then as an older woman, although I am probably older now that she was then. A woman waited until everyone else had left the sanctuary and then she grabbed me and pulled me into an alcove off the side of the church. And she asked me a question and by the looking into her eyes I knew it was not a casual question. And the question was this: What do you do if you cannot forgive?

Thirty one years later I can not remember what I said to her, but I do know this, that my answer at the time was woefully inadequate. If for no other reason that I had not lived life enough myself to know how profound the question really was. What do we do if we cannot forgive?

Well, I’ve been thinking about her question now 31 years and I have a 31 one year long answer that I want to boil down for you into a few minutes this morning. My answer has three parts:

The first part of the answer to her question is another hard question. And the hard question is this: When we can’t forgive is it possible that there is something it for us? Is it possible that we get something we want by hanging onto our anger and our hurt and our pain or our grievances rather than choosing to forgive? It is a hard question.

I think I held onto my class anger for many years because it justified in my own mind my ambition for recognition and power in my own little world. I brooded over the slights that I saw my parents suffer as a result of their accent and English not being their first language. I raked my garden of remembered grievances about the way I thought my family had not been treated fairly or well. In the process I think, I thought it justified my ambition at the time for recognition and power. If they had been treated that way, if I

had been treated that way through them, then it was okay for me to get what I wanted in my little world even if sometimes I was not as considerate and as nice to others as I should have been. Let me mention by the way that I am no longer ambitious. Somewhere along the line I realized I had accumulated in my world more recognition and power than I could handle.

I think that the hard question is: Do we choose not to forgive because not forgiving justifies our own behavior which otherwise we would have to face as not fully responsible and accountable.

Eric Berne, the psychiatrist who years ago came up with a kind of therapy he called transactional analysis talked about emotional green stamps. When I was a kid we used to collect green stamps. Remember green stamps? When you went to the store or the gas station they gave you a green stamp for every dollar you spent. And you would go home and put the green stamps in your little book. When you had accumulated enough books to get what you wanted you took the book to the redemption center where you turned them in and in return for a toaster or a clock or whatever it was that you had managed to save up of green stamps to earn.

And Eric Berne used to say that almost all of us collect emotional green stamps. Every time we feel slighted, or hurt., or not treated well we take that emotional green stamp home and put it in our book and after awhile we will have saved up enough to have earned a tirade, or a tantrum or a fight, or a drunk or an adultery. We will have decided that we had been hurt enough to give ourselves permission to do what otherwise we might consider irresponsible and unaccountable.

The first part of the answer to the question is: If it seems to us like we can not forgive, is it possible that we are getting something that we want for ourselves out of hanging onto our hurt and grievance.

The second part of my answer is a definition. Sometimes I think we find it hard to forgive because we do not know what forgiveness really is. Sometimes I think the reason that it seems to us impossible to forgive is because we misunderstand the meaning of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not sluffing something off. Forgiveness is not saying to our selves and others that it did not really matter, it was not important. Forgiveness is not thinking that we ourselves are too important for what happened to us to have mattered. Forgiveness is not pretending not to have been hurt. Forgiveness is not pretending not to be angry, or resentful, or disappointed.

Forgiveness begins by us being able to say, "You have hurt me. You did something to me that was wrong, not fair and not just. And it does matter. It matters to me a lot . It hurt me deeply." Forgiveness begins by being able to say that we have been hurt and wronged and then choosing to forgive.

Garret Keizer in his little book, *The Enigma of Anger*, forgiveness is finally a miracle. That forgiveness is not the natural order of things. Forgiveness is not part of the evolution in our genes. Part of the natural order of things is revenge and retaliation of things. Forgiveness is choosing when it would be natural for us to hurt another back. To decide to forgive, I think one of the reasons we sometimes find it seemingly impossible to forgive is because we try to pretend that we have not been hurt or if we have been hurt that it does not matter.

Forgiveness begins by recognizing that an injustice has been done and it does matter. That opens up at least the possibility of forgiveness.

The third part of my answer is an affirmation. Having said these two previous things: Is there something in holding on to our anger for us? Do we understand what forgiveness is? Having said those two things I want

to make this affirmation: if you still find that it feels impossible for you to forgive something or someone after what I have said there is a place for you in the Biblical story. I intentionally picked as one of our lessons this morning the angriest passage of scripture that I could find. Jeremiah 18 is angry. When Eileen read it preparing for the worship service this morning she called me up and said, "How am I going to find a hymn to follow that lesson?" But Jeremiah 18 is not the only angry passage in the Bible. Read the Psalms. There are some Psalms that theologians and Biblical scholars have not have know how to deal with. Read Psalm 35 and Psalm 37 and Psalm 69 and 109. These are angry Psalms full of rage and vengeance.

If you still find it impossible to forgive there is a place for you in the Biblical story because this Bible is whose tradition we try to live is as realistic and as honest a book as you will find any where in the world.

I believe that the important thing is us living in the tension in the way things are and the way they ought to be. The world that we live in is not they way things ought to be. We are not at the Escaton yet. We are not in heaven yet. We live in the world of the way things are and so we live in the tension between the realities of life and yet the "ought" that we dream about and hope for and know. The important thing is living in that tension. Do not collapse in tension. Do not pretend that you are in heaven yet if you are not. Do not pretend that you have been fully sanctified and perfected yet if you have not. But also do not collapse the tension of knowing that there is another way that we ought to be.

I once had a man tell me that there was a sin in his life that he knew was a sin, but he was not ready to give it up yet. His question was: should he come and receive communion or not. Since he knew that there was a sin in his life. He knew it was a sin but he was not willing to give it up. Should he maybe not be receiving communion was his question. I asked him a question back "Does receiving communion make you comfortable or less comfortable with your sin?"

In a flash he answered back, "Less comfortable."

And I said, "Then you ought to receive communion more often."

The meaning of a life of faith is not that we are perfect, but that we continue to live with in this tension between the way we are and the way that God hopes and dreams that we might become.

Johann Christoph Arnold of the Bruderhof Community has written a wonderful little book that I recommend to everyone called I Forgive. And in his book he puts it this way he says that forgiveness is just a step. Forgiveness is a journey. It is a journey of a life time. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way, he said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act that we do. Forgiveness is a permanent attitude that we seek to learn."

Any discussion in the church of Jesus Christ about forgiveness always comes back to the cross. And it especially comes back to this image of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, looking at those who were crucifying him and saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." If you pay attention to that verse in your study Bible, you will see that it is footnoted. And the footnote will tell you that in many early manuscripts that verse does not appear as it is recorded in our Bibles. And I have a theory about that. My theory is that hanging on the cross Jesus looked at those of us who were crucifying him and said, "Father forgive them." And that idea was too radical for the editors of scripture so they added the words "... for they know not what they do."

I think that is a later addition. I believe that on the cross Jesus simply said, "Father forgive them." And it is too much for Christians to understand ever since so we tried to soften it and find excuses.

None of us are Jesus. We might not be able to hang on a cross and say, "Father, forgive them." But as Rev. Peter DeGroot reminds us in staff often when we are struggling with what we ought to do in different situations. He reminds us that we are people who have promised to walk in the way of Jesus. We are not

Jesus. But we are a people who are seeking to walk in a way of Jesus. And the way of Jesus no matter what is finally the way of forgiveness.

May we walk together in that way.

In the way of Jesus.