

PLEASE FORGIVE

GENESIS 50:15-21
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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One of God's better jokes on us was to give us the power to remember the past and leave us no power to undo it. We have all sometimes been willing to trade almost anything for a magic sponge to wipe just a few moments off the tables of time. But whatever the mind can make of the future, it cannot silence a syllable of the past. There is no delete key for reality.¹

So begins Lewis Smedes' book *The Art of Forgiving*.

Today's faith question is another big one:

Forgive us our debts? What is/isn't forgiveness? How do we do it?

Throughout this sermon series, I'm guessing there have been some questions that resonated with you more than others. But this one affects all of us.

There isn't a single person in this room who has not needed to be forgiven or who has not needed to forgive.

¹ Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), xi.

To be human is to hurt and to be hurt by one another. This is true from the realm of global politics and centuries old conflicts that keep repeating themselves, right down to our most intimate relationships.

And as long as human beings hurt each other, whether intentionally or unintentionally, forgiveness will be necessary.

There is no delete key for reality, no matter how desperately we wish that there was!

I *wish* there was. I suspect many of us would love to have a do-over (or two or three or twenty) when we reflect on our lives. We wish we hadn't made that comment or lost our temper or stubbornly refused to reconcile. Perhaps we wish we hadn't made this or that choice and wonder how our lives might have unfolded if we had done things differently.

But there are no do-overs in life. Wounds cannot be erased only healed. We need to forgive and to be forgiven. This is about as basic a human universal as you could hope to find.

Ernest Hemingway famously opens a short story called "The Capital of the World" with these words:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

The joke is about the prominence of the name Paco, but I think it could also speak to the deep and universal longing for forgiveness.

The problem is that forgiveness is hard. *Really* hard.

We instinctively hold on to the wrongs that are done to us (whether they are real or imagined or a combination of the two). We cling to our pain and use it as leverage for the future. Who knows when it might be useful to haul them out again?

This protects us (we think) from future harm and seems a necessary strategy in a world where grace is so rare and self-preservation seems the name of the game.

We seem to think that forgiveness ought to be carefully measured out, dispensed only when we can be certain that it will not bring us further pain.

And all the while we keep others and ourselves chained to our pain.

So what is forgiveness? And how do we do it?

I want to start with two things that forgiveness *isn't*.

First, forgiveness is not forgetting. It does not mean that we pretend that nothing happened. We don't casually say, "Oh, it was nothing" or "don't worry about it."

Second, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Sometimes, we can forgive someone who has hurt us without the relationship being repaired or restored. Certainly in cases of abuse or violation, this is sometimes the only option.

So, what is forgiveness?

Miroslav Volf in his book *Free of Charge* says that forgiveness involves two parts.

1. "To forgive is to name the wrongdoing and to condemn it."
2. "To forgive is to give wrongdoers the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against them."²

The first part involves honesty. We tell the truth about the hurt someone has caused us. We don't pretend it wasn't really so bad. We don't bury painful truths and hope they will just go away. We name reality. We say, "This is what happened and this is how it affected me."

The second part involves mercy. We refuse to hold it against the other party and perpetuate the wearisome eye-for-eye calculus that our world has known since the

² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 129-30.

beginning of time, where every wound must be returned in kind, where we're always keeping score.

Forgiveness deprives this whole cycle of oxygen. It courageously steps off the tit-for-tat treadmill and says, "I willingly lay down my need to get even or to seek revenge, and I forgive you."

How do we do it? This is the big question. In *The Art of Forgiving* (which is a great title, incidentally, because forgiveness is surely more art than science!), Lewis Smedes has a three-stage process that I found quite helpful.

- 1. We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.** We remember that there is very often pain behind the inflicting of pain. Just as we say and do things that we regret, so others do the same. If we can get to this point of realization, we locate ourselves in the same place as those who hurt us: broken human beings who make mistakes and hurt each other.
- 2. We surrender our right to get even.** Again, we get off the treadmill of always responding in kind. We understand that "getting even" never really gets anywhere productive. And, perhaps most importantly, we entrust justice to God knowing that God alone sees all the wrongs that we endure and commit completely and that God alone can be entrusted to judge fairly.
- 3. We revise our feelings toward the person we forgive.** We slowly begin to wish for good for them, whatever that looks like.

None of this is easy. And the whole process can take a long time, particularly number three. We don't just check these off the list and find ourselves magically having warm thoughts to those who hurt us. Life doesn't work this way, as you may have noticed.

I was in Saskatchewan this week and sometimes when I travel I find myself in unexpected "pastoral situations." Even after a decade of being a pastor, I am still regularly surprised by how willing people are to unload once they discover that they are in the presence of a real live pastor!

At any rate, I was in one such situation this week. A woman I met found out that I was a pastor and spent the next hour telling me what seemed like her entire life story, including the breakdown of her marriage nearly a decade ago. It was clear to me that the pain was still raw.

I told her that I was preaching a sermon on forgiveness this Sunday and asked her if she had any wisdom from her story to offer.

She smiled and then shook her head. "I don't think I'm there yet..."

Forgiveness is very hard work. Some wounds go very deep. And it can take years to feel like we're making any progress.

But if we can move through something like this process, I think we can get to a point, maybe even after many years, of genuinely having our hearts softened and our disposition toward those who hurt us changed.

I think we see all of these things in the story of Joseph from our text this morning.

Lets set the scene.

Joseph was the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons and his father's favourite, as demonstrated by his gift of a the famous robe of many colours.

His brothers, not surprisingly, did not appreciate this as much as Joseph did. It didn't help that the seventeen-year-old Joseph seemed quite enamoured with his status as "favourite son" and eager to share this with his brothers.

He also had a rather vivid dream life. This, too, he was keen to share with his brothers, particularly when his dreams involved his brothers:

6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: 7 We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

Those of you who had siblings can imagine how this kind of a dream would be interpreted. Nonetheless, Joseph persisted in sharing another:

Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

He even tells his dad about this dream, upon which his father promptly and wisely tells him to shut up.

Alas, these dreams had stoked the flames of his brothers' jealousy and hatred and they begin to plot a suitable response for their brother.

Some wanted to kill him, but they end up selling him to some nomadic traders moving through the region, fabricating an incident with a wild animal, lying about it to their father and telling him that Joseph was dead.

The traders make their way to Egypt where Joseph is sold to the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Through a long series of events involving Joseph resisting the advances of the captain's wife (and being thrown in prison for his troubles), getting out of prison by interpreting Pharaoh's dreams as a warning to prepare for an imminent famine, Joseph ends up being put in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

He prepares the nation well and they can live off their stored up grain when the famine hits.

This leads to Joseph's brothers' reentering the picture. The famine had hit Canaan hard so they go to Egypt to buy grain. And it leads to them unwittingly (and unknowingly) finding themselves face to face with the brother they had sold into slavery as a seventeen-year-old boy. Now he is around forty years old and the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, almost single handedly responsible for avoiding a famine in the land.

What will Joseph do? He has every right to be angry. Wrong has been done. He spent long years languishing in an Egyptian prison. He was unjustly treated. He was sent away to a foreign country where he was cut off from his family and was utterly alone. If ever someone had been justified in withholding forgiveness, it would have been Joseph.

And yet...

Joseph forgives.

He names the wrong accurately: *You intended to harm me...*

He doesn't hold it against them. He speaks kindly to them. He promises to provide for them in their vulnerable situation. He tells them not to be afraid.

Joseph was a powerful man with all the leverage in this situation, yet he acknowledges that he is not God.

And he draws attention to the vitally important truth that God can take even what we human beings intend for evil and repurpose it for good.

Joseph could have focused on himself, but he saw how God had used his own story with all of its hard parts and all of the things he had suffered to save many lives.

He sees his brothers as human beings who didn't know what they were doing.

He lays down his right to get even.

And he revises his feelings.

It's worth remembering that Joseph had decades to get to the point where he could forgive his brothers. Could he have responded like this when he was twenty-five or thirty? Maybe. Maybe not.

As I said earlier, forgiveness is not a formula where you mechanically move through the required steps and inevitably arrive the desired outcome. It is an art as most relational things are.

But we do know that Joseph was convinced that God could take even terrible wrongs endured and repurpose them for good.

Finally, I think there is a difference between generic forgiveness and Christian forgiveness. At least there should be.

As Christians, we don't forgive primarily as a pragmatic strategy or because it's better for our mental health or because it's an important part of relational harmony, even though it is all of these things and more.

1. We forgive because God has forgiven us and because God expects us to forgive in response to this.

Mark 11.25:

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

I am struck by the absence of one party in Jesus' command here. Jesus talks about me and he talks about my Father. But he doesn't talk about the person I'm supposed to forgive.

This is surely an oversight, right? Surely there's a missing clause that belongs after "against anyone"—something like, "If you have anything against anyone, *and if they have demonstrated appropriate remorse and penitence and have come to you with regret, brimming with tear-stained sorrow...*" Or something like that.

But, no, Jesus will not tolerate our qualifications of forgiveness. He will not allow us to measure out forgiveness according to the merits of our neighbour. He will not let forgiveness be a reward that we bestow. He will not yield to our desire to make forgiveness mostly about us and our woundedness.

The criterion for forgiveness, it seems, is our having something against someone. This is the poison to be removed; this is the disease to be cured. Jesus knows that we must forgive for the sake of our own souls.

2. We forgive in imitation of Christ—the one who famously said on the cross, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

With those twelve words, Jesus summed up and modeled the powerful and transformative forgiveness that we are to offer one another.

Forgive them, even though they are guilty... even though they deserve far worse... even though they're not looking to be forgiven (yet).

Forgive them. They don't know why they cling to wrongs perpetrated against them the way they do, imagining that they offer some protection or insurance in a world so saturated with wrongdoing.

They don't know why they behave so selfishly and stupidly. They don't know why kindness so often seems such a small and feeble thing to them.

They don't know why their hearts so easily harden rather than being the tender organs that the world so desperately needs.

They don't know the countless ways in which they inflict wounds upon each other.

There is so much that they don't know.

So I ask you to forgive them their sins, before it ever occurs to them to ask for it or to even recognize their need for it.

And maybe, in being forgiven this extravagantly, they will begin to learn of the things that are possible in this world when forgiveness is freely offered.

As Christians, we follow a forgiving God who forgives preemptively and prodigiously. And this is what we are called to do also.

Miroslav Volf:

God's forgiveness is indiscriminate. That's the bedrock conviction of the Christian faith. "One has died for all," wrote the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 5:14). That simple claim has immense implications. All means all, without exception. There are no people who are sufficiently good so that God doesn't need to forgive them and Christ didn't die for them. There are no people who are too wicked for God to forgive them and for Christ to die for them... God's grace more than matches any conceivable sin. "Where sin increased," wrote the Apostle tersely but profoundly, "grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20).³

I am convinced that we are never more fully imitating the God revealed in Jesus Christ than when we forgive.

May God help us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Amen.

³ Volf, 177-78.

