

For-give-ness

Sermon by Reverend Jill Cowie

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Several months ago, I asked my husband Ben what forgiveness is to him, and he thought for a minute and said maybe you should ask what is not forgiving. He went on to tell me, voice constricted with pain, how when he was in ninth grade the brother of his best friend, came up to him in the middle of the busy high school hall, and asked him to hold out his hand. Ben did, thinking he was going to receive a gift of some sort, and the boy, in front of Ben's peers, took his cigarette lighter, still hot from use, and pressed it into his palm. I asked, horrified, what happened after that, and Ben said nothing happened, it was the end of the year and the next year he changed schools. I have been married to him for 23 years, and that is the first time I heard that story, the first time I heard that pain.

I am guessing that each of us, when we think of forgiveness may go first to a time in our life when it didn't happen and we needed it. A moment when we weren't forgiven, or when we didn't forgive, a place of stuckness, that still holds a lot of pain and emotional energy. Go to that place if one comes to you, and name if you can the feeling of not forgiving, anyone? Perhaps you feel anger, withdrawal, resentment, blaming, judgment, self-righteousness, or sadness. Not forgiving is destructive to us.

What makes these emotions even more powerful and confusing is that often they happen when we think we are forgiving and we are not.

First we use denial. We say to ourselves we are not hurt, when in reality we hurt a lot and may for a long, long time. Have you ever watched *Pride and Prejudice* when the mother, says to one of her daughters "you certainly ought to forgive them like a Christian, but never admit them to your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing." Denial.

Second, we make excuses. We're nice. Well, he didn't really mean that, or it's Ok because this thing happened in his childhood. No. When we forgive we do not pretend that the offender isn't responsible no matter who their parents were, what their childhood was like or whatever else. Forgiveness is not excusing.

Third, we try to forget. We pretend the hurt never happened. That doesn't work either. When we forgive, we do not block the memory, nor do we nourish it. Forgiveness is not forgetting.¹

I have tried a blend of these three things, denial, being nice, and forgetting, and you know it just doesn't work, though for years I thought it did.

¹ Notes of Carl Scovel

More often than not these things helped me cherish my anger and hurt. The place that I go to when I think about not forgiving is when my mother died of cancer, when I was twenty two. I was angry. Angry not only because she had died, but also because she had accelerated her death by taking all her pain medications at once, she robbed us of precious time. What mother would do that?

This question fueled my anger which actually kept me in relationship with her and gave me energy instead of depression--- and it also gave me an identity-- as a victim. An identity I carried with me into my early years of marriage and motherhood. After awhile, I lost my true self --for self as victim makes forgiveness impossible.

What then is forgiveness?

I am still working on it and I have read, and talked, and listened to many people, as I would like to listen with you after the service. What I think of it now, forgiveness is not something we do, but something we receive. It is not an action, but a gift. A gift that returns us to our precious selves, to our essence, our suchness, a gift that returns us to life.²

Consider the story of the prodigal son, and the spiritual dynamics of forgiveness and not forgiveness. You may remember a younger son asks his father prematurely for his half of the inheritance he shares with an older brother. Having received it, he does the very worst, he goes to the far country and wastes his substance in riotous living. In a modern setting, one might think, as Vernon Johnson does in his book *I'll Quit Tomorrow* of the younger son as an alcoholic going to Los Vegas, where the streets are lit up with beckoning signs. He slips into one pleasure palace after another until his resources are totally wasted. In the pit of self-degradation, the turning point comes for the young man. In the biblical story, this happens as he feeds the swine on a farm, he realizes that the swine eat better than he and all that he was is gone. He decided to return home, and serve his father's fields instead.

What thoughts the prodigal son had on his long way home we can only imagine. Undoubtedly they were excruciating, for he had no notion of what he could be returning to. He anticipated punishment, maybe even wanted it.

Imagine his emotions during the next scene. His father saw him "when he was yet a great way off, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him!" One might pass over this meeting, as I have, with some shallow comment such as "Forgiveness is wonderful, wasn't it fine of the father to behave like that after all his son had wasted?" This, Johnson says is to miss the point entirely. The response of the son to his father's actions is without question one of great shock and dismay. He says as much when he pulls back from the embrace and replies, I am no more worthy to be called thy son!"

² In discussion with Carl Scovel

His father's reception, is impossible for him to accept. He is coming to his father to disclaim what he is- a son, much easier to be a servant in the fields. If only his father had banished him there that would have allowed him to evade what the arms around his neck demanded, that he accept himself as himself, as his son with all the pain and the love. The father sensing the return of the son to his true self, wants to nourish him and calls for the fatted calf to be killed in celebration, for this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.

This would be a happy ending if this were all there was to the story. However, the spiritual dynamic of not forgiving was present in the older brother, who was in the field when all this was going on and had been there, loyally over the years doing the work his brother should have been done. In effect he shouts, "Father you never killed a calf for me, never even killed a goat for me and my friends, so how come he disobeyed you, left home, wasted all your money and now he gets all the goodies, and I who have obeyed you get nothing." His father's call to be glad falls on deaf ears, for forgiveness is not only difficult but at that moment unthinkable for the elder brother, he has been hurt too often, too long and too deeply.³

What then is forgiveness? Peter asked Jesus "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times should I forgive him? Seven times? Jesus said to Peter, "No, not seven, seventy-time seven for the kingdom of God is like that." I don't think he meant for us to count 490 time of forgiveness and then let the guy have it. Jesus meant that forgiveness is a way of life. We should forgive always. Always?⁴

Reverend Marilyn Sewell, who some of you know from her film *Raw Faith*, writes in her book *A little Book of Forgiveness*, just how hard this can be. Forgiveness she says is a spiritual response that requires humility and relinquishment. It is a softening of the heart that goes beyond the understandable impulse to judge and punish. She offers us five principles to guide us on our path, principles that helped guide me back to being a daughter who could receive a mother's love.

First she says, take responsibility for any part you may have had in the hurtful situation. If you are like me, and know the victim role, we can sometimes seek out pain.

Second, see people for who they are, not for who you would like them to be. Understand that other people are different from us, in temperament, experiences and family background.

Third, realize that forgiveness is not about the other person, it's about you. Forgiveness is a profound act of self-healing that allows us to make choices that we could not otherwise make.

³ This Prodigal Son interpretation and telling is from Vernon Johnson's book "I'll Quit Tomorrow"

⁴ A sharing from Carl Scovel, my spiritual director

Fourth, stay with yourself and your pain, get under the anger to the hurt and then on down to the sadness and the grief. This is a big one for me. I discovered under my anger about mother's death was another layer of hurt related to her emotional reserve and what I perceived to be her judgment. Something my husband, in his emotional reserve gives me plenty of chances to work on.

Fifth and finally realize that forgiveness is too hard to do alone-go with intention but depend on grace.

We have all probably been at this place of trying for years to forgive, and just can't. We realize therapy and time won't heal all wounds. What then? Sewell says, don't blame ourselves, for forgiveness is not natural or logical or easy. We cannot simply will ourselves to forgive. Instead we can pray to be open to it. Sometimes it means praying for the person who has hurt you. Grace is looking for a way in.

Start, she says, by making the conscious decision that you want to forgive, even if your feelings might not match, they will catch up. Second admit your own volition is not enough, without spiritual help, you cannot forgive. Third, find your own way to engage the sacred and listen. Meditate, walk, or journal regularly. You do not have to believe in a personal god to take this step. What is needed is simply the notion that there might be a dimension of knowing called the spiritual and you can receive help from this dimension.

Sewell writes of a woman she ran into at a conference, a person known as a highly respected spiritual leader. She said that she had never been able to forgive her father who had been abusive to her when she was growing up. This woman decided to do a day-long retreat in which she did nothing but repeat Buddhist Meta mediation as a prayer for her father. This was her way of preparing her heart. "May you father be happy and peaceful of heart and mind" she prayed, and "May you father be healed, and find peace." (repeat) All day, she repeated these words, and near the end of the day she was suddenly flooded with feelings of compassion and love. It was the breakthrough she had been hoping for all her life.

Forgiveness is a gift, one that we receive, and the more we receive it, the more it is given. Researchers on forgiveness discovered that forgiveness does not come easily but it does come suddenly. Serene people who were victimized and no longer feel resentment, described not an act of forgiving, but a discovery of themselves as having forgiven.

And this was true for me. My prayers helped me to see mom as a whole person, and I saw myself differently in her eyes. Something shifted. I now put flowers every week in what was my mother's favorite blue vase in front of her picture, and every morning when I look at her, I feel nothing but gratitude for the ways in which her love is blossoming in my life.

Jesus said that forgiveness is a way of life. He went as far to say that the reason we forgive is to be forgiven.⁵ I have found this to be true with my husband and my kids, forgiving them, enables them to forgive me, and visa versa. Somewhere in the midst of that exchange, I discover the experience of having forgiven myself. It is my very longing to be whole that pushes me to forgive.

I share with you now, the last line of the little book of forgiveness, Sewell says,

“That deep desire to forgive is what scours out the stony core at the center of my heart and makes it possible for me to return again and again to love, yes, in spite of it all. May it be so for you, for us, for all.

Please join me in singing Break Not the Circle

In closing, the words of Lao Tzu
Allow yourself to yield, and you can stay centered.
Allow yourself to bend and you will stay straight.
Allow yourself to be empty, and you will be filled.

⁵ Carl Scovel and an interpretation of Matthew, 18: 21-25