

Series: Finding Freedom in Forgiveness
Part I: Why We Forgive
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*Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.*

*If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.*

*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

*Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins. -- Psalm 130, NIV*

Today we are beginning a new series which coincides with the start of a new year. The end of one year and the beginning of a new year often invite us to look back at the past and see what actually happened in that whirlwind of events. It also asks us to think about what might happen in the coming year as we make our plans and New Year's resolutions. For many of us it may be a time to make a new start – to do things differently from the past. And maybe that is where a series of messages on *forgiveness* figures into all of this.

For six Sundays, we are going to be taking an in-depth look at forgiveness. Our plan is to take those classic questions many of us were taught when we took a writing class – who, what, when, where and why – and ask those questions about forgiveness. We will also add one more question – how. My guess is that many of us probably think we should practice forgiveness -- we just don't know *how* to do it. While that may seem like a lot of messages on forgiveness, (maybe too many) I am finding that the more I get into really trying to understand what forgiveness is and what it is not, the more complex it all seems to me. But I want us to maintain a balance here. Forgiveness is genuinely hard. But I don't want to make it seem so difficult that we end up saying, "Well that's too hard, so just

forget about it!” Genuine forgiveness is somewhere in between those two extremes of being too superficial and thereby ineffective, or being too complex and daunting.

Recently, I have been watching a new TV program on Wednesday nights called *Revenge*. I am not recommending it as having any real redeeming moral qualities. The plot is based on how the main character, Emily, is seeking to get back at all of those individuals who hurt her father when she was a little girl. Each episode is filled with revelations of who is out to get whom. In some ways, it is the *opposite* of forgiveness – it is all about getting even and payback -- all in the name of justice.

Actually, trying to get even is one way we respond to being wronged or hurt. If we are human and alive, we have all been hurt or wronged to varying degrees. Ever since the Garden of Eden, human beings have been hurting each other. And when we have been hurt or wronged, there are basically three responses that those of us who have been genuinely hurt can choose.

One is to try to get even, like that TV show *Revenge* – to make someone pay or hurt for what they did. The second way is to try to ignore it or deny it and pretend that it really did not happen, or it is not that big of a deal. The third is the way of forgiveness. Those are the three choices we have in life. The first way of seeking revenge or getting even really never touches the hurt or pain we feel. And even if we see someone get what’s coming to them, we still have to deal with our own feelings. And how much “justice” or payback is enough? Does it ever really balance the scales?

The second approach – to deny or ignore – doesn’t work if the wrong is significant enough because our hurt just goes underground and begins eating at us from the inside out. It pops up in our lives as we remember and re-live the pain over and over again. We may try to pretend it is not there, but often when we least expect it, it comes out in other ways.

Only forgiveness, the third way, is the option we can choose which brings freedom. And the primary person we find that we set free when we choose to forgive is ourselves. It may or may not affect others (we will talk about that in later weeks) but it can set us free to heal and begin to move on with our own lives.

The other insight I want to share here at the beginning is this: many of us may resist forgiveness, not only because we do not know exactly how to do it, but also because we have misconceptions about what forgiveness is and is not. Again, we will go into much more depth about this in coming weeks, but I feel that I need to say this up front because some of us may never get past this and be open to considering forgiveness. So here is what forgiveness is *not*: Forgiveness is not approval of what someone did to us. It is not forgetting what was done. It is not something we *have* to do (it is a choice). It is not giving in. It is not the same as reconciliation or restoration. It does not mean we have to let someone hurt us again, nor is it the same as trusting someone. (See *Forgiveness . . . the Ultimate Miracle* by Paul J. Meyer and *The Art of Forgiving* by Lewis Smedes.)

Now there is a lot in those statements that we will unpack later. I wanted to say them up front because my fear is that some of us have genuinely been hurt so badly and been given misinformation about what forgiveness means from a Christian perspective, that we would resist even considering forgiveness as an option. If you have been hurt, I want to ask to simply give it a chance to see if this

may be a way for you to find healing, and regain a measure of control and freedom in your life. I believe this is the only way we can fully experience that freedom and control, so please at least give it a try.

Today we start with the *why* question – *why do we forgive?* Our passage from Psalm 130 focuses on someone “crying out from the depths” to God for help. If David wrote these words, (which tradition says he did), then David knows something about needing forgiveness in his own life. You may remember that David wanted another man’s wife, Bathsheba, so as king David ordered the man, who was one of the officers in his army, to be put at the front lines and left there to be killed in battle. David then takes the man’s wife for his own and conceives a child with her. Later he is confronted by one of his advisors who know what he did. Psalm 51 is another Psalm in which David cries out for God to “create a clean heart within him.” This Psalm 130 also speaks words of someone who knows the pain of his own life and the wrong committed as he cries out to God out of the depths.

When we talk about real forgiveness, we know that whether we are the victim of the wrong, or the one who caused it, it touches us at our very core. It is from those “depths” that we cry out to God for forgiveness, or for healing from the wounds we have received in life.

The Psalmist is focusing on his own sins and need of forgiveness when he says:

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you. (Psalm 130:1-4, NIV)

The Psalmist cries out to God because he believes that *God is a forgiving God*. That is the first reason to why we forgive. *We forgive because God forgives us*. Before we can really forgive one another, we need to understand and believe that God forgives us. And God forgives us first. God takes the first step to forgive because God knows that we need forgiveness.

Not too long ago one of our church members stopped me and reminded me that in a sermon I preached a while back I said three times, “God loves you.” She said that it was the first time she really heard that and how it had made an impact on her life. Let me go one step further today and say that because of God’s love for you -- *God forgives you. God forgives you. God forgives you*. Whatever you have done, no matter how awful, God’s grace is sufficient to forgive you and to bring healing and wholeness to your life.

When we accept that we are forgiven by God, not because of anything we have done, but simply because God loves us, then we are free to begin to really forgive others. Why do we forgive? Because

God forgives us. Our ability to forgive is not rooted in anything we can do on our own. Even the ability to choose to forgive is the result of God's grace.

When I have been really hurt, most of the time, if it were up to me, I could care less what happens to the other person – that is my normal human inclination. But, because I have been told again and again that God loves and forgives me, I can begin to choose to forgive others. And when we do that – we model what God has done for us.

Author Lewis Smedes put it this way: “When we forgive the things forgiving is for, we copy God's own art. God is the original, master forgiver.” (*The Art of Forgiving*: 20) Paul writes in one of his letters, “. . . and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32, NRSV) When you are hurting because of what someone did to you, whether it was last week or twenty years ago, *God hurts for you*. God has a tender heart for your pain. God wants to help set you free from that pain so that you can move on with your life. So the first reason why we forgive is because God has forgiven each one of us.

The second reason we forgive is because *it is good for us*. In talking about this passage from the Psalms, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “Forgiveness leads to liberation from life as it is presently organized.” For many of us our lives are “presently organized” around a hurt or wound we received in the past. Just talk to us long enough and we will tell you about how we have been hurt or wronged. Or, if we don't admit it, it is still there having taken up shop in our inner being. It taints most of what we do and think about ourselves and others. It is real and it hurts. What forgiveness can do, if we so choose, is to begin to free us from that prison. It is a way of taking back control over our lives from something that ends up making us un-free. Forgiveness is first of all about us and our pain. And whether or not it affects those who have hurt us (and it may not), we can choose to open ourselves up to God's grace and choose to forgive in ways that set us free.

This past week, in preparing for this sermon and studying how we forgive, I went back and looked at some of the events of my own life in which, as far as I can tell, I had been genuinely hurt and wronged. Then I went through a process of honestly saying to myself what had been done. And then, through God's grace, I chose to forgive those individuals who hurt me. Now I may have done this before, but I did it again anyway, just to make sure. I asked God to forgive each one of them and named what they had done. I then turned it over to God and let it go – meaning that I no longer intended to focus on it again as best as I could and I was giving up my desire to get even. And that was it!

Now I may think of these situations from time to time, but I am trusting that God will forgive them and allow me to move on with my life. I will tell you from my own experience that there was a tangible burden lifted off of my shoulders when I did that. It felt like I was being freed from something that had been holding me back. That is how I can best describe briefly what it felt like to forgive someone. The promise is that God will begin to work healing and wholeness in our lives. Forgiveness is something we can intentionally choose to do, and the reason why we do it is because *it is good for us*. And, there is nothing wrong with that. It is one very healthy way of being good to ourselves and loving ourselves the way God loves us.

The third reason why we forgive is because *it can be good for others* – both for those who have wronged us, and for those who have to live with us. Now we will go into that more in-depth in later weeks, but I will say it again and again: forgiveness and reconciliation is not the same thing. Because I forgive does not mean that I have to let someone who has hurt me back into my life to hurt me again. In fact, in some situations that is exactly the wrong thing to do. If someone is dangerous to us, we are not required to invite them into our lives to hurt us again. As one person said, it takes one to forgive, but it takes *two* to reconcile. And to be reconciled, we need to build back up a level of trust, which may never happen in this life. Our ability to forgive is not based on whether someone asks for forgiveness, or even if they know about it. Some folks who have wronged us may never realize what they have done or they may have already died. But, we can choose to forgive -- whether they know about it or not.

Now should we seek reconciliation if it is possible and the right thing to do given certain circumstances? Yes. But is that always possible or even advisable? Not in this life. Forgive – yes? But must we allow an untrustworthy person to hurt us again – no.

And for those who say we must forgive *and* forget – I don't think that is even humanly possible. In fact, some things we may choose to forgive, but we must never forget because we need to make sure they never happen again -- if it is within our power. The holocaust is a prime example of something those who were wronged may choose to forgive, but we should never forget the evil which humankind is capable of inflicting on others.

The week after Christmas, while I was on vacation, I took some time to try to get our cars inspected so that I could pay the tag fees which will be due on my birthday in a few weeks. I went to the inspection station near our home. Since I had three cars to inspect, I was hoping to get in and out in a hurry. But when I pulled up, the guy who worked there opened my door, looked at my CDs in the door, and commented on how we had similar tastes in music. So we started talking and we discovered we both played guitar. We talked about the best concerts we had seen over the years. His told me his name was Ken. He said that in addition to his job inspecting cars, he also sold guitars a friend of his made. He then went in this office and brought out this card which he gave to me about Burly Guitars. The card has a picture of these high-end, handmade guitars carved out of Burly Maple – that's where the name came from. Not only were they nice works of art, but when you turned over the card, you saw a schematic of the interior design of the guitar. The creator had a patent on this guitar. He had taken the hollow inner chambers of the guitar and placed tuning forks embedded in the wood. Now, one of the qualities guitarists like is for a guitar to sustain notes. His idea was to place tuning forks in the guitar so that when you hit certain notes, it would resonate through the wood. It is a fascinating idea to me.

But later I started thinking about that as a picture of our lives and how God, the master creator, made each one of us. I believe that God has built into each of our lives certain mechanisms that resonate with things that are good and true – maybe like tuning forks resonate when certain notes are played. I believe that each one of us resonates when we hear about forgiveness and freedom, maybe because we want to be forgiving like God and be free from the things that hold us back from being the person God created us to be. So when we hear about something true like forgiveness – ping – it strikes a pitch, and something within us resonates with that. My guess is that each one of us here

today is struggling with the need to forgive or to be forgiven. I hope that God's grace will resonate in your life today and in the days to come, so that you can echo that forgiveness in your life, and experience the freedom God wills for each one of us.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.