

## What's So Important about Forgiveness?

The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

First Presbyterian Church

August 13, 2006

Psalm 86

Mark 2:1-12

For the last few years, a rabbinical colleague of mine has invited me to attend High Holy Day Services with her congregation. These are incredibly moving services and I have found that the theology of atonement and forgiveness is especially rich. One part that has been particularly profound to me is at the (Yom Kippur) Service. Near the beginning of this service, the Rabbi addresses her congregation and asks for their forgiveness for anything she has done in the past year to offend or hurt them, whether it was knowingly or unknowingly, spoken or subtle in action. There are powerful components to this request for forgiveness and what it acknowledges. The request implies that we are not often aware of hurtful actions; it implies that is never too late to ask for forgiveness; it demonstrates that we all are in need of forgiveness; no one is above that need. It is as if in asking this question, the Rabbi is teaching the all too important point that forgiveness is not merely something we hand out but something we must also learn how to receive.

For most of us in the Christian tradition, our first contact with the theological idea of forgiveness came to us in the Lord's Prayer. The line from the prayer, "and forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors" may have provided our earliest concrete concept of what forgiveness is all about. This simple sentence talks about two complicated forms of forgiveness. The first, "forgive us our debts" asks for divine forgiveness and the second, "as we forgive our debtors" refers to human forgiveness. There is something connective about the how these complex ideas are brought together in this prayer; we are taught, by reciting it countless times, that we can learn something about human forgiveness by paying attention to how we are forgiven by the divine. In this simple sentence of this prayer we are introduced and reinforced about the concept of forgiveness having a reciprocal meaning.

But why do we ask for forgiveness in the first place? It alleviates tension in our relationships when we can admit that maybe, just maybe, we have done something offensive or inconsiderate. It diminishes the time we spend in conflict with others. It helps us to lessen the severity of our punishment. It is a humble act of love that exposes the imperfections we so desperately try to hide.

And why do we forgive others? Practically speaking, we forgive because harboring resentment, although at times quite gratifying, requires us to expend a great deal of emotional energy. The majority of us pardon those who have asked for our forgiveness because we recognize in them our own limitations and longing for forgiveness. Of course, the greater the injury, the deliberateness of the offense, and repetition of the insult, the more difficult it is to forgive. In these difficult situations forgiveness can feel like a compromise.

The biblical teachings about forgiveness are almost as complicated as the concept itself. For example, in Matthew 18:21-22 we hear this familiar teaching about forgiveness:

*Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'*

Peter seems to feel compromised by the unlimited expectations that accompany forgiveness. We imagine Peter's frustration mounting with further questions: "Rabbi, there must be a limit to how many times I must allow myself to be the injured party. Just because the offender apologizes, do I have to continue to be burdened by another's absolute disrespect of my humanity?"

We have all asked Peter's questions of ourselves: How many times am I going to allow the same person to treat me badly? When does "sorry" cease from being sufficient? Jesus' response to these questions is less than satisfying. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." This is an extremely large number when you consider that the law only required three times. As you already suspect, the mathematical equation for forgiveness that Jesus offers Peter emphasizes that forgiveness is to be the norm, not the exception.

The teacher's response to his student's concern reminds me of two lines from a poem titled "Anyway." The lines read, "People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered/Forgive them anyway." The author of this piece is not known, but there is a rumor that this poem was found by Mother Teresa's bedside when she died.

The Passage that we heard from Mark's gospel this morning also focuses on forgiveness; it is equally disquieting in its teaching about forgiveness. Here the focus is more specific on the forgiveness of sins, which clearly falls into the realm of divine forgiveness. The passage begins with a powerful image of a man on a mat, his friends unable to get him to Jesus through the front door but refusing to be turned away, they strip off part of the roof and lower their friend to Jesus from above. The power and dedication that brings the man in contact with Jesus is very moving. Even though it is early in Mark's gospel, the reader is somewhat familiar with what to expect in these situations: a touch or a word that heals. For this reason, the words Jesus does speak are completely unexpected: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

In this crowded house are not just disciples and fisherman from Capernaum, there are Scribes present as well, and is as if the very power of the scene shifts instantly to a slow-motion reel as the scene shifts from a powerful visual image to internal dialogue. It is the Scribes who, understandably, ask in their hearts the theological question about this action – how can this man forgive sins? Forgiving sins is the realm of God alone. Jesus senses their question in his own spirit and challenges them to reconsider who he is. He identifies himself as the Son of Man, a messianic term, and then finally gives the response we expected at the beginning of this narrative when it appeared to be a story simply about healing. He says to the man, "Take up your mat and go to your home." It is at this point that one can't help but wonder what was going through the mind of the man who was paralyzed as he lay before these men and their discussion. We are almost dizzy with the shifting focus, first it on the paralyzed man and his friends, then on Jesus, then on the Scribes, then on Jesus, then on the man, and then finally on Jesus again.

In this passage, Jesus is not only making a pronouncement about who he is, he is also making a very powerful theological statement: he is rejecting the barrier between being "righteous" and being a "sinner" and this is not an easy concept to accept.

Forgiveness, whether it be in the divine realm or the human realm is the great equalizer. This quality of forgiveness may be why is not a very easy thing to deal with most of the time. As usual with Jesus' teachings, we are encouraged to imagine the peaceable kingdom -- a world of radical egalitarianism where oppression can no longer exist. The burden of re-imagining, recreating, and reorganizing community falls on us. Basically, the suggestion is that we, the earth dwellers, enter into the process of grace.

Grace gets into the mix quickly when we talk about forgiveness. As I was consulting my favorite resources to write today's sermon, I went to one of my most reliable sources for theological concepts like forgiveness, an old tattered seminary volume called *The New Handbook of Christian Theology*, only to find this next to the entry: Forgiveness: *see Grace*.

Classical Christian doctrines on grace teach that it is a free gift from the divine. Augustine has summarized it as follows: "grace bestows merits, and is not bestowed in reward for them." What does this teach us about the nature of forgiveness? Forgiveness is not merely the ability to tolerate or accept difficult behavior. Forgiveness is not merely the art of haggling with our creator. We, as human beings, are commissioned to actively participate in the redemptive process of transformation and justice. Therefore what grace teaches us is that forgiveness assures us that we are worthy and that we are capable of change, and provides us with the hope to envision a restored community.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, the editors of the book, "*Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*" write, "Grace as the divine empowering of human beings to live and work for a just and loving world has traditionally been spoken of as sanctification, the process of being made and making holy/whole."<sup>i</sup> Grace assures us that no situation or circumstance is without hope, which enables us to offer forgiveness and to be forgiven. Because of grace, forgiveness is the process by which we remove the obstacles to being loved and the obstacles to freedom.

Responding to ourselves and to our world with forgiveness is a courageous and difficult act. Approaching life with a forgiving spirit requires a movement that is less about triumph and more about a kind of hope that is broad in its embrace and malleable and flexible enough to be constantly reshaped. To believe in forgiveness is to believe in change.

Still, we may feel like we need a private tutor to assist us as we work through that equation on forgiveness. Perhaps if we could just understand the formula we could start to believe that there is more to us than guilt, regret, depression, pain and suffering. Our faith tradition holds to the ideal that we receive and extend forgiveness without ceasing, but the process isn't so easily defined.

The rule of forgiveness is more like what Wistawa Szymborska writes in her poem *Nothing Twice*. "No day copies yesterday/no two nights will teach what bliss is/in precisely the same way, with exactly the same kisses."<sup>ii</sup> As we live and work together in community, issues of diversity make us aware of our judgments and assumptions. Diversity will teach that forgiveness in precisely the same way, with exactly the same release, will not happen twice.

We have all participated in acts of forgiveness and we have all been the recipients of forgiveness. We can't articulate it, but we know what it means and what it feels like when we have been forgiven. Although "nothing can ever happen twice", maybe there is

a common desire in every formal act of contrition and in each causal utterance of "excuse me."

Going back to Peter's questions again: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" From these questions we don't know who has sinned against Peter or for that matter the nature of the sin. Interestingly enough, even without these details we know, from our own experiences, that Peter longs for a reprieve. He does not want to cancel out past offenses, as much he wants a change. Forgiveness is the synonym for our longing for something new. This longing is part of our human construct; this is why Jesus answered Peter's concern as follows: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Forgiveness is not an occasional act of compassion; it is a way of life. Forgiveness presents the opportunity for new relationships and new identifications.

In her book, *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey*, Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer uses bath time in families as the part of the daily routine to talk about forgiveness.<sup>iii</sup> In this chapter, she makes some excellent points about a child's ability to allow forgiveness to be completed. She tells a story about a mother punishing her son one evening at mealtime and sending him to his room after dinner. When she checked on him he was laying across his bed sound asleep; she went to bed herself and found herself tossing and turning thinking she had been too harsh with him and determined to get up in the morning and set things right. Her son woke her up, ready for the new day, cheerfully asking her "do you want to hear a neat riddle?" For him, the incidents of the night before were seemingly forgotten. What she realized was that for him the events of the previous evening were completed; the forgiveness that was really needed in this case was for her to forgive herself.

Forgiving ourselves is the last piece of the forgiveness equation that we have not touched on, and it is perhaps the most important and most difficult part of forgiveness to learn. It is in fact the part of forgiveness that allows us to better understand and accept the breadth and width of God's grace that is available to us. Forgiving ourselves is also what allows us to model a more divine posture in our forgiveness of others, because we understand the repetitive nature of our own need of forgiveness. But ultimately, learning about self-forgiveness is that piece which truly allows healing to begin. It is, as much as any forgiveness that comes from the outside, that thing which allows us to pick up our mats and walk back to our home.

Please don't miss understand, I am talking about really learning what is involved in forgiveness: time, patience, gentleness, and an understanding of our human frailty. Forgiveness of self has to include a really true understanding that we do make mistakes and we are in need of forgiveness.

If we can do that work, then we can learn the most important lessons about how to help create something new in the world. We can make forgiveness a way of life. It is a courageous and difficult act. It is an approach to life that is not so focused on triumph, or who is righteous and who is not, but it is a way of life that is grounded in hope and the belief that with our hands stretched by the wideness of God's grace, we can bring about a change in ourselves and in the world that is powerful beyond measure. The tools are before us, determining how we use them is in our hands.

---

<sup>i</sup> Thistlewaite, Susan B. and Mary Potter Engel, Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside. (Orbis Books; Maryknoll, New York, 1998), p. 177-192.

<sup>ii</sup> Szymborska, Wislawa, Poems: New and Collected 1957-1997. (Harcourt, Inc.; New York, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>iii</sup> Fuchs-Kreimer, Nancy, Parenting as a Spiritual Journey: Deepening Ordinary and Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions. (Jewish Light Publishing; Woodstock, Vermont, 1996), p. 112.