

“Credo, Fourth Series, Part VII: The Forgiveness of Sins”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for June 21st 2020 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 6: 5-15

If there are any words in the great creeds--both the Apostles' and the Nicene--words which ought (at least in theory) to bring instant joy to our hearts, surely they are the words at which we arrive this morning: “The Forgiveness of Sins”. Alas: those words raise as many, if not more questions and challenges, as any to be found in the creed. Mind you! Lest we presume that we are alone responsible for the creation of those questions and challenges, I hasten to add that none other than Jesus himself plays a significant role in raising those questions....and offering those challenges. Go no further...

...go no further than the prayer we now know as The Lord's Prayer--the Prayer of Jesus--which invites us to ask the Father to *forgive us **our** trespasses (our sins, our debts) as **we** forgive those who have trespassed against us*: thereby creating an indissoluble link between our request for God to forgive us and our willingness to offer forgiveness to others. Nor does Matthew's Gospel--which presents Jesus' prayer in the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount--permit us to overlook that weighty petition. Unlike Luke who, in his sharing of the Lord's Prayer highlights the petition about “daily bread”,ⁱ Matthew's version makes certain that we will not fail to notice the reciprocal connection between the forgiveness we seek and the forgiveness expected of us. Having shared the prayer, the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel adds this rather ominous warning: *if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*. Unlike every other petition in the prayer, the one for forgiveness seems to come with a hook. While the prayer in and of itself doesn't make the Father's forgiveness conditional upon our willingness to forgive, Matthew's add-on makes it rather difficult to evade that impression. *If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*. Indeed!

When I first set out to ponder, for this morning's reflection, just what the Creed is getting at when it speaks of the “forgiveness of sins”, I at first both imagined and **hoped** that it might be possible to speak here, exclusively of what God has done, is doing and intends ultimately to accomplish for us in and through the “forgiveness of sins”. Certainly the location of the affirmation of the forgiveness of sins in the Apostles' Creed makes that a tempting way to proceed. After all, it comes immediately following the announcement of “the Communion of Saints”, and just ahead of the twinned announcements of “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”! Clearly we are in eschatological territory here; clearly we are pondering the “last things”, in which the “forgiveness of sins” most certainly has a decisive role to play. And yet, before we can pop open the bubbly and celebrate the glorious destiny that awaits us, a seemingly unavoidable way-station signals that we have no choice--as followers of Jesus--but to recall the stubborn connection upon which Jesus himself insisted: the connection

between the **gift** of forgiveness God-in-Christ offers to us, and the **task** of forgiveness summoning us to forgive others. Talk about a two-sided coin! Talk about a two-edged sword! Then again.

Then again! It would be a rather gross over-simplification on my part, were I to pretend that all of our problems with forgiveness entail the “offering of forgiveness” side of the equation. If 30 years of pastoral experience has taught me anything, it has certainly taught me that our connection to **both** the offering and the receiving of forgiveness are fraught with challenge. Furthermore, those 30 years have taught me that many of the same obstacles that make it difficult for us to offer forgiveness are the very ones that make it difficult for us to ask for it and to receive it with simple gratitude. Forgiveness--two-sided coin and two-edged sword though it be--might also be regarded as an intricate tapestry which, as soon as you pull at any of its threads, causes all of its other threads to unravel. As soon as you focus on forgiveness as Christ’s gift to us, it is impossible not to talk about forgiveness as a task Christ sets for us. But the opposite also pertains: It is almost impossible to ponder the task without grounding it in recollection of the gift. The two things go hand-in-hand; let no one tear apart that which God has joined together! Before we consider forgiveness in all its intricate interwovenness, however, first a pastoral note which must always be sounded, whenever the topic of Christian forgiveness is raised from the pulpit.

Here’s the thing. Those 30 years of pastoral experience have also taught that we regularly confuse “forgiveness” with “reconciliation”. They are not the same thing. As my friend Ed Searcy explains: “forgiveness is a direction, not an arrival.” Depending upon the nature of the harm that has been done to you, depending upon the nature of the person who has done the harm, reconciliation may simply not be possible (at least not within the life of this present world) between you and the person who has sought to harm you. Forgiveness does not obligate you to permit a toxic person to continue to make your life a living hell day in and day out. What forgiveness does entail--even when a truly toxic person has caused you harm--is a willingness to forego personal vengeance coupled with a willingness to pray for that person’s highest good. That last idea, incidentally, isn’t some absurd suggestion I cooked up during a bout of insomnia last night; it was Jesus’ bright idea that we pray for our enemies, and frankly...

...frankly, I have long been convinced and remain convinced that it is the single most powerful form of prayer, arguably the defining act of a distinctively Christian spirituality . Also the most challenging, mind you: but powerful when one is given the Spirit-led capacity to do so. But that--at bottom--is what forgiveness means for you and for me...and just because you are still angry at an offender, just because we remain bruised at a severe harm, doesn’t mean you haven’t begun the journey of forgiveness. It simply means you have not yet reached the destination.

Okay. With that clarification in hand, let me return to the suggestion I made earlier: namely, that the act of asking forgiveness of God can often be difficult for the same reasons that it can be challenging for us to offer forgiveness to others. That,

incidentally, helps to explain why so many of us find the weekly “prayer of confession” the part of Sunday worship we would be happiest to jettison. I will submit that the key word here--the key stumbling block on both sides of the “forgiveness equation”--is the word the Creed has forever linked with the word “forgiveness”, namely the word “sin”. It’s a word with which we have become terribly uncomfortable, especially when it serves as a reminder of that even more problematic word: “sinner”. You see: when push comes to shove, the really awful thing about forgiveness--both the receiving of it and the offering of it to others--is that it really leaves us no choice, at the end of the day, but to learn what it means to be a “sinner”...to learn “how” to be a “sinner”. While it is undoubtedly correct to suggest that we forward thinking “liberal mainline Protestant” folk (in the aftermath of the Enlightenment) have some special issues when it comes to acknowledging our status as sinners, let’s not kid ourselves. That reluctance...that hesitation...has an ancient pedigree.

Consider! Consider two of Jesus’ classic parables: one from Luke, one from Matthew.

The Lukan parable I have in mind is, of course, that of the Prodigal Sonⁱⁱ: although the title by which it is best known, in and of itself, provides a pretty strong indication of the extent to which we characteristically over-simplify the parable which should surely be known as the Parable of the Compassionate Father and His Two Troubled Sons. By whatever name we designate that remarkable parable, I will gladly acknowledge my initial shock when I moved into congregational ministry and made what was for me, an unexpected discovery: namely, the bone-deep dislike so many harbour for that parable! Why? Because so many of us in a typical United Church congregation are upstanding citizens who instinctively identify with the elder brother: the brother who oozes resentment in the parable’s final episode, resentment based on his perception of the unfairness with which he has been treated. And, of course, if strict justice is the ultimate measure by which to assess the father’s behaviour in the parable: his actions would, I think, be found wanting. Given dad’s over-the-top response to the return of his good-for-nothing son, how could the taken-for-granted elder brother not feel at least a twinge of resentment? Unlike the coddled, pampered young brat of the family, the elder brother has earned his own way....carried his own weight...paid his dues. How galling to see his father make a fool of himself, lavishing on the younger brother all of the things that the old man actually owed to him: the one who stayed home and stayed loyal, but now has nothing to show for it. The younger brother’s return, far from being a source of joy, serves as a horrendous reminder of the extent to which life has played a cruel trick on him. He has no forgiveness to offer and, frankly, has nothing for which to apologize. Case closed.

The parable from Matthew’s Gospel tells a very different story but has a surprisingly similar dynamic. A servant is confronted by his masterⁱⁱⁱ; he owes the master an absurd sum, an amount that would have likely taken a working person 200,000 years to repay. When the master vows to throw him into prison, this financially

and morally bankrupt servant pleads for forgiveness, which the master agrees to offer. And yet, no sooner does the servant encounter one of his fellow servants--a man who owes him a trifling sum--than he throws his fellow servant into prison when he discovers that the hapless fellow cannot repay his debt. When the unforgiving servant's hypocritical behaviour is revealed to the master, the master realizes that he has no choice now but to change course and throw the unforgiving servant into prison. More clearly than even the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the unforgiving servant exemplifies one whose refusal to **extend** forgiveness sentences him to a life in which forgiveness will not be **offered** to him. While the defining issue that plagues the elder brother in Luke's parable appears to be resentment, resentment ignited by the favorable treatment the prodigal receives from their father, the defining issue in Matthew's parable appears to be "forgetfulness": better still, a **selective remembrance** that chooses only to recall that which is owed to me, conveniently forgetting to remember that which I owe to others, including the infinite debt owed to the One I know to be my Creator...my Healer....my Redeemer.

Side by side with those two gorgeous parables, permit me to add a remarkable incident--a living parable, so to speak--from the life and ministry of Anthony Bloom, who served for many years as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain. As a young priest, he was approached by a man who wanted Father Anthony to show him God. Father Anthony explained that even were it within his power to accomplish that request, the man would not be able to see God. Why? I'll let Father Anthony pick the story up from there.

He writes^{iv}: "I thought--and I do think--that to meet God one must have something in common with Him, something that gives you eyes to see, perceptiveness to perceive. He asked me then why I thought as I did, and I suggested that he should think a few moments and tell me whether there was any passage in the Gospel that moved him particularly, to see what was the connection between him and God. He said, 'Yes, in the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, the passage concerning the woman taken in adultery.'^v I said, 'Good, this is one of the most beautiful and moving passages. Now sit back and ask yourself, who are you in the scene which is described? Are you the Lord, or at least on His side, full of mercy, full of faith in this woman who can repent and become a new creature? Are you the woman taken in adultery? Are you one of the older men who walk out at once because they are aware of their own sins, or one of the young ones who wait?' He thought for a few minutes then said, 'No, I feel I am the only Jew who would not have walked out but who would have stoned the woman.' Father Anthony responded: 'Thank God that He does not allow you to meet Him face to face.'"

To repeat. One of the defining challenges we face, as those who would seek to be disciples, is coming to terms with the stark implication of the complex universe of gift and challenge offered to us by Christ under the heading: "the "forgiveness of **sins**", including the stark implication that--far from being entitled to throw the first stone-- my only genuine entitlement is to come to know myself as a sinner, to learn to live with the knowledge that I am a sinner, and that--while I live inside this fragile, fallen flesh--a

sinner I shall remain. Mind you, a **forgiven** sinner! Nonetheless: a sinner to the very end.

Let me try out another word here: one that may have a somewhat more positive resonance than the word “sin” let alone the word “sinner”. The word I have in mind is the word “solidarity”: solidarity.

Many years ago--the spring of 1981 to be precise--not long after my baptism at Riverside Church in Manhattan, I was privileged to take a 6-week Lenten Bible Study led by the man who had, in fact, baptized me: William Sloane Coffin. The study was based on the New Testament book, Romans, which was an especial favorite of his, a book which has become over time an especial favorite of mine. Early on in that study, while discussing the book's early chapters with their emphasis upon our shared human sinfulness, Coffin made the point that there is “a solidarity in sin” that precedes our “solidarity in salvation”, adding that even our “solidarity in sin” has something beautiful about it, once we are willing to acknowledge it.

Realizing full well that there may seem something a trifle odd in linking so powerful a word as “solidarity” with so problematic a phenomenon as “sin”, it is nonetheless worth recalling Paul's insistence--also in Romans--that we human beings were one in the first Adam long before we were given the opportunity to realize that we are one in the second Adam, Jesus Christ.^{vi} Indeed! Whatever else we might wish to say about the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, what can safely be said is that he saw no intrinsic connection between himself and his younger brother, despite the fact that he was (in countless ways he appears unwilling to acknowledge) no less indebted to his father than was the younger brother. Whatever else we might wish to say about the unforgiving servant in Matthew's parable, it can safely be said that he saw no intrinsic connection between himself and the fellow servant to whom he refused to extend forgiveness, despite the fact that he himself was in desperate need of forgiveness only an instant earlier. And yes: whatever else we might want to say about the gutsy chap who requested Father Anthony show him God, it is more than a wee bit obvious that he saw no connection between himself and the woman taken in adultery, a woman at whom he would have been only too happy to throw the first stone. Whatever else solidarity means...whatever else **human** solidarity means surely it means--at a bare minimum--cultivating the capacity to see our own face in the faces of the others with whom our lives intersect, not only in their times of triumph and success, but especially at those times when they are marked by failure and betrayal: those times when there is no choice but to recognize them (and ourselves in solidarity with them) mired in brokenness, mired in sin.

And yes: to be truthful here. It may well be the case that I will only begin to appreciate the full depth of my need for forgiveness...coupled with the full depth of my obligation to offer such forgiveness to others...when I come to see myself in them...and when I come to see them in myself...every time I look in the mirror. And I am struck...

Struck by the fact that an old adage--one with which I have long been familiar--took on new meaning for me this past week. The adage to which I refer, one generally attributed to Karl Barth, suggests not only that we preachers--but that we Christians in general--ought to conduct ourselves with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other hand. I have always appreciated that well-chosen phrase, although I have generally taken it to mean that we need the Bible in order to give us our fundamental orientation to life, but that we need the newspaper in order to point us in the direction of the issues and concerns that ought to shape our agenda as we prepare to walk the walk of faith. And, of course, there's truth to that. But frankly...

...has this ever been more urgently true than it is in the year of our Lord 2020?...

...frankly, perhaps an even more basic reason for having the newspaper no less than the Bible on hand, has something to do with the extent to which it remains the case that "if it bleeds, it leads": i.e. "bad news sells!" That newspaper in our left hand, you see--long before it hands us an "agenda", and frankly far more tellingly than any "agenda" it might succeed in handing us--does a splendid job of reminding us of the messy state of the world in which we make our home: a world of wonder that remains a world of heartbreak and horror. I can certainly choose--even with that newspaper in hand--to regard myself as in no way implicated in the state of a world that has been my home for nearly 70 years. I can certainly choose--even with that newspaper in hand--to point fingers at a wide range of "others" who are to blame for the "state of the world", with no willingness to recognize my own culpability for that which greets me in the day's headlines. Or, perhaps because I do hold the Bible in my other hand, I will discover that I have no stones left to hurl at others, that I have in fact been left with no choice but to acknowledge myself in all that I discover when I peruse the day's headlines: the good, the bad and the ugly. At such moments perhaps I will discover that confession flows more readily, that acknowledgment of my own broken humanity is embraced less reluctantly, that I can actually succeed at learning to see myself and learn to live with myself as a "sinner" with a wee bit less kicking and screaming than would otherwise be the case! Then again!

Then again! To learn to regard myself as a "sinner" would, no doubt, be an utter impossibility were it not for the privilege of knowing myself as a **forgiven** sinner. The word about "sin" may be an essential word; at the end of the day, however, it should be neither our first nor our last word. And yes: while it is most certainly the case that the Creed's invitation to affirm "the forgiveness of sins" lands smack dab in the middle of its third and final paragraph, the paragraph devoted to the things of the Spirit...the **Holy Spirit**...

...here especially it is crucial not to lose sight of the extent to which that Spirit is rightly regarded as the Spirit of **Christ**: the Spirit that works to enact **here and now**, that which Christ definitively undertook to achieve **then and there**: an

“achievement” that may well be said to have reached its zenith (certainly from the perspective of the particular plank in the Creed under consideration this morning) with the cry said to have gone forth from the Cross. “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”^{vii}

Some 20 centuries later, as an even cursory glance at the headlines will readily attest, we still do not know what we are doing. For all of our impressive scientific and technological advances, the human family continues to inhabit a world horrifically scarred by injustice and inequity. Indeed: you can take it as given that scientists will have found ways either to prevent or to manage the COVID-19 pandemic long before we will have come even within spitting distance of the healing of the racial and ethnic divisions which have--if anything--grown even wider over the past couple of decades. We remain as far removed as ever we have been from a world in which true justice will have been enacted for all God’s children: which is to say a world in which none of us will be tempted to pursue justice with a ruthlessness that sees no room within its four walls for that seemingly expendable little item known as mercy. And yet: whatever else the sorry history of revolutionary movements has taught us since 1789^{viii}, they have consistently brought to bear the stark truth of James’ warning, namely that “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”^{ix} And I am reminded...

...reminded of a saying I long ago heard attributed to St. Augustine but which, to be honest, I have never been able to trace. But it’s a good saying and so I will share it: to the effect that “the Kingdom of heaven will be founded not on the perfection of virtue, but on the forgiveness of sins.” Let me repeat that. The Kingdom of heaven will be founded...not on the perfection of virtue, but on the forgiveness of sins. I kind of hope Augustine really and truly did say that: but even if he did not, it is a statement to which I will continue to cling. And yes!

What is true of the Kingdom of heaven is even more manifestly true of the kingdoms of this world. Without denying that, when we turn our backs on the quest for justice, we betray our Lord, it remains no less true that when we imagine it to be within our power to enact perfect justice within the kingdoms of this sin-sick world, we will unleash the demons of forgetfulness and resentment that lie just beneath the surface of every human heart. It is the power of enacted-mercy--a.k.a. forgiveness(!)-- which alone can free us from those twin demons and yes: it is the power of forgiveness--more tellingly than any other power on earth or in heaven--that can assure us that we have been--and that we thankfully and mercifully remain--in the presence of Jesus Christ. Who invites us to forgive....all the while assuring us that we have, indeed, been forgiven!

May His name be praised and glorified...this day and forever more. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Luke 11:1-13

ⁱⁱ Luke 15: 11-32

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 18: 21-35

^{iv} Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), pp. 27-28.

^v John 8: 1-11

^{vi} Romans 5: 12-21

^{vii} Luke 23: 34

^{viii} The year that launched the French Revolution

^{ix} James 1:20. This, of course, is not to deny that “anger” will sometimes alert us to wrongs that need to be addressed; I maintain that anger--in and of itself--will fail to right any of those wrongs.