

SERMON: “Forgiveness Now”

First United Church, Waterloo, ON – Sunday, October 17 2021

PRAYER: “Draw us closer to your compassionate heart, O God, as we reflect upon your Word. Enfold us in your transforming power, encourage us in the living and sharing of our faith, keep on equipping us to acts as agents of your coming realm where all humanity and all creation will live in peace and harmony enjoying life abundant. Amen”

Reciprocity, a mutually agreed upon fair exchange of goods, services, favours, ... whatever, is a generally acceptable practice. “You scratch my back; I’ll scratch your back.”

But what happens when the exchange is imbalanced, or not fair, or even one-sided?

An acquaintance, not a close friend, gives us an expected gift. Are we good at receiving?

Or do we feel obligated to try to reciprocate?

Giving and receiving gifts can be a form of playing power games;

we can become uncomfortable feeling that we are in a position of being indebted.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

This longest petition in the midst of Jesus’ community prayer has the sound of reciprocity in it; but it isn’t. It’s about grace and compassion.

It’s life-changing, world-altering, even outrageous, behaviour and activity.

It’s about seeking to live and act in ways that are not our ways, but God’s ways.

Ways that come highly commended by Saint Paul in writing to the Colossians:

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,

compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience,

forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other;

as God has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Colossians 3:12-13)

Sounds like a list of core values for living in supportive Christian community.

Kindness and forgiveness are being lifted up among other possibilities

as core values here at First United. Do they resonate among us as true for us?

I suspect that kindness is easy for us to identify; that we can readily think of examples of being either on the receiving or the giving end of it.

So, the focus for today is on forgiveness. God’s often outrageous forgiveness.

I A LINGUISTIC TANGENT?

For starters, consider Jesus’ head-and-heart challenging story of the Ungrateful Servant.

We heard it as recorded in Matthew 16.

A ruler, or wealthy landowner wants to clear his books and settle accounts owing.

A servant is brought to him who owes a bundle that he could not pay right away.

“Sell him off with his spouse and children”, the ruler ordered.

The servant pleaded for mercy and an extension of time to pay. It was granted.

The servant however, sought out a person who owed him a much smaller amount.

The indebted man couldn’t pay right away and asked for mercy.

No such luck! The servant had the debtor tossed into prison.

Word about that got back to the ruler who was enraged that the servant could not extend the mercy he had received to the one who owed the servant money. Toss him in jail too, until he pays of his debt!

That's how it is in God's realm too, said Jesus. That's what could very well happen *"to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."* (Matt 16:35)

Now if you happen to have a background in the Presbyterian church, you will recall that the version of the Lord's Prayer generally used in that denomination takes Matthew's Greek text and renders it: *"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"*. And that is utterly accurate. Matthew uses a rare verb form: *"ὀφειλήματα"* that Luke turns into a past participle, *"ὀφείλοντι"*, in the second half of the petition. The root verb is *"ἀφίημι"* and was commonly used in classical Greek for the remission of actual debts, or penalties, or fines.

Jesus was well-versed in the Laws of Moses, and was well aware of the oppressive power of economic indebtedness and obligation that sat heavy on the shoulders and hearts of first-century Jewish Palestinian citizens peasants and non-peasants alike.

Such a state of inequity and social imbalance fractures community harmony and creates a breeding ground for greed, theft, bribery, extortion – a host of ungodly actions.

God's idea of restorative community life laid out in Deuteronomy 15:1-3: including the remission and cancelling of all debts every seven years. [See also Exodus 21:2] In addition to that, Leviticus 25:10-13 proclaimed a Jubilee Year every 50 years: where everyone returned to their family property, fields were left to rest, all debts got cancelled, and generally everyone started over from a 0-based budget. The Hebrew scriptures also contain several injunctions against charging interest, and granting relief from having one's home or possession repossessed (Nehemiah 5:3-13). Can you hear it?

That's the sound of brains short-circuiting, hearts cringing, and stomachs churning among all the accountants and the die-hard capitalists among us.

Given the widening economic disparities and injustices of our present world do you think we might be well overdue for a global economic overhaul: with the creation of utterly fair trade markets and guaranteed annual incomes and taxation reform in every nation, where in seven years all personal, corporate, national and international debts are forgiven, wiped clean; where we create a world where the realm of God infuses itself into the life of our planet so that there truly is a climate of commonwealth?

Not capitalism, not communism, not socialism, but some truly equitable sharing of resources system we haven't even tried yet?

Praying *"forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"* has that radical vision in view. Biblical forgiveness includes that kind of bottom-line financial readjustment.

II BROAD-BASED FORGIVENESS

That's just one piece of God's very broadly-based forgiveness.

Beyond economic imbalance, forgiveness is most often about restoration after a situation of inter-personal harm or communal shame or unjust, broken relationships.

And, as Jesus once responded to a curious, inquiring Peter, it's repeatable and unending:

"How often must I forgive someone who offends me? Seven times even?"

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (or seventy times seven = 490). I

While classical Greek seldom used the verb "*ἀφίημι*" in the context of forgiveness of wrong, the Greek text of the Old Testament often used that verb that way.

A dying Jacob sent a message to Joseph through his brothers to forgive them the mistreatment and cruelty they inflicted upon him. (Genesis 50:16ff.)

There is frequent mention of God granting forgiveness for a violation of divine commandments after some form of settlement or sacrifice has been made. (Check out Leviticus 4 and 5, etc.).

There are all manner of references to God as a forgiving God, (e.g. Exodus 34:6)

"merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness",

who deeply desires to restore to wholeness all the broken relationships between humanity and God, among human beings themselves, and between humanity and creation.

That brokenness shows up in personal, corporate, and systemic forms which make us appear and behave as disrespectful, ungrateful recipients of the loan of life, which tarnish and smear the image of God in which we have been made, the image of love.

"Sin" is the biblical word for that human state of affairs.

I prefer to replace it with synonyms like "wrongdoing", "waywardness", "error", "failing".

"Sin" has become too personalized in some strains of theology, too trivialized outside church.

The risen Jesus, in John's gospel (and by implication in Luke),

gives his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and empowers them to forgive or retain "sins".

The Roman Catholic church has built a whole ritual practice of the confessional around that:

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned".

The penitent is given prayerful and restorative action to take.

Three problems: one is that this is a means of works righteousness whereby we earn our way back into God's good favour.

A second is that the only real forgiveness is that which is mediated through a priest.

And a third is that it reduces a life of faith to moral behaviour, saddling people with an overwhelming sense of guilt that needs to be atoned for.

Which is also the problem and often the abusive practice of other strains of Christian teaching that solely emphasize "getting ourselves right with God" again so we can ensure that we go to heaven when we die.

There's no incentive here to be engaged in God's restorative and transformative work going on in this world here and now, not just with persons, but also with communities, corporate bodies, nations, and systems.

For some years now, I have avoided including "Prayers of Confession"

in United Church services of worship partly for those kinds of reasons,

partly because a lot of us come to church already feeling beaten up and beaten down,

and partly because as one of my colleagues once said,
“I’m tired of inventing and coming up with faults and wrongdoings
that even I’m not sure I’ve actually committed.”

3

Nonetheless, yes, as Paul put it:

“All of us have gone astray, all have fallen short of the glory of God”. (Romans 3:23)

Yet the God of steadfast love is out to reclaim us all, to restore us to right relationship.

Forgiveness is the means by which that process is set in motion.

It is a conditional practice, and it’s important to be clear about what that condition is.

In some parts of Scripture, it sounds like our readiness to be forgiving

is the prerequisite to our receiving God’s forgiveness, Psalm 18:25 for instance:

“With the loyal you show yourself loyal (O God);

with the blameless, you show yourself blameless; with the pure, you show yourself pure;

with the crooked, you show yourself perverse.”

Or, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)*

Both Jesus, in the prayer he taught disciples, and Paul, in his letter to Colossian believers
are clear that our ability to be forgiving rests on mercy we have already received.

We can forgive those who wrong us

as a consequence of our having already been granted forgiveness through God in Christ.

“...forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another,

forgiving each other; as God has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

That transactional power and gift is one of the outcomes of Jesus’ death on a cross.

The flow of forgiveness is always sourced out of and back into God.

Which means we are not in control. We don’t forgive others

out of some stockpile of righteousness and holiness we have on hand.

To ask first for forgiveness for ourselves admits we are grateful for the grace already accorded us
by a God who is truly the author behind the script of our life and faith story.

And often enough, forgiving the one who has wronged me,

means letting go of and overcoming my own self-sabotage,

means freeing my better self to rise to the surface and subdue my ego-centred self.

All of this may sound easy, but it is quite something other than that.

It can get utterly outrageous.

In the riots that arose after the trial of police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King
in Los Angeles in March of 1991, a raging gang dragged Reginald Denny from his truck.

After months painful recovery, Denny met up with his attackers,

shook their hands and forgave them.

One reporter’s comment on that scene was:

“It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.” 2

I suspect we’d be hard-pressed to find anyone in media today who’d recognize God at work.

CONCLUSION

If forgiveness lies within us as a core value we seek to live out, it invites us to find ways and means of helping God's visionary realm of right relationships come into reality even here and now, in this life, in this frazzled, violent, and wayward world. In a study session on Our Lord's Prayer about six years ago, a pastor in Flint, Michigan said: *"Jesus is forming a people who would re-present God to the world. To do that Jesus wants them to really get the heart of God, so that God's heartbeat would be their heartbeat."* 3

Welcome again to the adventure, the mission, and the joy of being persons of faith *forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as God has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* we can indeed re-present God's heart.

Notes

1 See Matthew 18:21-22

2 See William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us...*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 1996), Chapter 7.

3 Jon Gildner, Central Church of the Nazarene, Flint, MI 7/6/15. See the church website for link to the Bible Study.

For additional pondering, you may also want to check out this resource shared by Lynne Blake-Dickson: Carry On: Reflections for a New Generation by John Lewis (former US Congress representative), chapter On Forgiveness pp. 87- 90.