

**FORGIVENESS  
ARE THEIR LIMITS?  
March 20, 2022 Minister Emeritis - Rev. Harold Wells**

Isaiah 55: 6-9, 12-13; Romans 12: 9-21; Luke 15: 11-32.

Forgiveness. A central element of what we call ‘the gospel’ of Jesus Christ.

An opening question on forgiveness: I ask you,

If you were a Ukranian mother, whose little child was killed when your house was bombed, and, with not a moment to stop and to grieve, you were forced to flee the country, with the rest of your family, leaving behind everything you owned – if that happened to you – could you forgive Vladimir Putin?

Or, you are a disabled elderly Ukranian woman, some of your family have been killed in the bombing, and you have been abruptly torn from your peaceful retirement home, placed in a wheel barrow, and dragged across the country to escape the bombs, and are now you are alone, a refugee among strangers in a foreign country, – just how furiously angry would you be, and could you forgive Putin?

If you were either of these people, how could you not hate him in your heart, how could you not be bitter and angry for the rest of your life? How could you not wish that great evil and suffering would fall upon him, and those he loved?

There are thousands of stories like this; it’s going on right now. The harsh realities that we see in our world these days press us to think more deeply about what it means to forgive.

It’s one thing to forgive someone’s minor faults, or somebody cheating you, someone embarrassing you, or insulting you. But when it comes to outright, malicious cruelty, especially to your loved ones, forgiveness is no small thing. I’m not sure I could do it.

We might begin by asking: What is forgiveness? And what is it not?

The word is used constantly in the Bible and in the teaching of Jesus, and can only be understood in the context of what’s being said.

Jesus says: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” So forgiveness means, practically speaking: Do not seek revenge. Don’t try to get even. Seek the well-being of those who harm you. You should actually pray for them.

So, forgiveness is not a warm friendly feeling about someone. No. But it is about the attitude and actions that you take toward those who offend or hurt you.

A genuine inner attitude of forgiveness may not be psychologically possible right away in circumstances of great suffering. It may take time. You will have to pray for God’s grace to let it go, and to forgive.

But Jesus does insist on this. It’s built right into the prayer he taught us: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” He even says: “If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.”

The point being: We all stand in need of forgiveness, whether for sins of commission or omission. Things we've done, things we haven't done. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

In Christ, we have received the forgiving grace of God. Now we extend that same grace to others.

When asked how many times we should forgive someone who offends us – seven times perhaps? Jesus says No, seventy times seven. In other words, there's no limit here. We can never give up on people and stop forgiving them.

This seems so extreme, doesn't it? Almost impossible. Why is it so important to forgive, and keep on forgiving? The person you're forgiving may laugh at you, couldn't care less if you forgive them.

But your forgiveness is important for you, for yourself. If you continue to harbour hatred in your heart, that doesn't hurt the perpetrator – not at all. It hurts you. It poisons your inner life, drags you down, and fills your life with anger and bitterness.

So, forgiveness is important for you. The one who is doing the forgiving.

It's important also because it's necessary for peace and reconciliation. When people hold grudges, and feed and nurture their hatred, it grows within them, and then conflict is likely to burst open like a festering sore.

Sometimes harm and violence result. Feuds can go on between people and families for a lifetime, or even for generations, when people refuse to forgive. It's important to break the cycle of mutual blaming and hating.

Most of us, of course, have never experienced the kind of brutal violence and harm that the Ukrainians are enduring right now. I certainly have not.

But forgiveness is also important at the level of ordinary life. We all have things to forgive.

Within marriages and family life forgiveness is essential. In everyday life, we have to forgive other people's faults and failings all the time.

In work places, with colleagues, in commercial life, in the life of the church as well, people often offend or hurt each other, and forgiveness is essential if we are going to go on living and working together.

So we don't just strike back, trading insult for insult, damage for damage. As Paul says, "Return no one evil for evil."

Sometimes 'turning the other cheek' is the right thing to do. Sometimes, but not always. Jesus told us to do that, but it's not an absolute regulation for all circumstances. Sometimes you have to forgive, but, at the same time, stand up for yourself.

Let's consider also what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does not exclude anger. Surely it's right sometimes to be angry. It's right sometimes to be outraged.

Wasn't Jesus outraged at the cheating of the poor people that went on at the temple? He was so disgusted he wielded a whip of cords, frightened the people, turned over the tables of the cheaters, and drove them out of the temple court.

Jesus, of course, had enemies, for example the Pharisees, that religious group of strict keepers of the law. They hated him, and Jesus was never reconciled with the Pharisees.

They tried to trap him and get him in trouble. And he tongue lashed them with words of denunciation, called them hypocrites, a brood of snakes, white washed tombs! He accused them of saying long prayers in public, while "devouring widows' houses."

Jesus was not naive about the malice, cruelty and sheer selfishness of which we human beings are capable. He must have witnessed the brutality of Roman soldiers who occupied his country, collecting exorbitant taxes, beating and abusing the people. He had, no doubt, witnessed many crucifixions.

He also knew only too well the wickedness of the local elite of his own country. He called King Herod "that fox". He was not in fact ever reconciled to the ruling class of his own people, those who plotted to be rid of him, and, in collusion with the Romans, finally had him executed.

So forgiveness does not mean saying something is OK when it's not.

And obviously forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation; forgiveness does not mean you're necessarily going to be friends, because friendship is a two-way street. You may forgive someone in your heart, but if that someone does not reciprocate, or refuses to receive forgiveness, then no reconciliation is possible.

Nor does forgiveness rule out resistance, or self-defence. Forgiveness is not some soft, sweet sentimental thing. If we look closely at the gospels, we find that Jesus was a forgiver, but also a fighter.

It's true that he persistently taught love, forgiveness and peacemaking – "Blessed are the peacemakers!" he said. "They shall be called the children of God." It's evident that he hated violence.

Yet, he also knew that resistance to perpetrators was sometimes called for. The attack on the temple trade is the prime example, but there's one other interesting text where Jesus counsels his followers to be armed, to carry swords.

The text is seldom quoted, but it occurs in the gospel of Luke, 22:36.

As his enemies grew in numbers and began to threaten him and his followers, Jesus can be found to say to his disciples: "Any of you who has no sword should sell his cloak and buy one."

A sword, of course, is a deadly weapon, maybe for self-defense, but also an instrument of aggression. He's telling them to go and buy a sword.

His disciples then produced two swords, and he said: "That'll be enough." Later, when Jesus was arrested, evidently at least some of the disciples were armed, and one of the disciples struck a slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus told them to stop: "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword," he said.

We cannot reconstruct the details of that whole situation. I suppose Jesus was not about to orchestrate an armed battle with the Roman army.

But the text seems to indicate that, while Jesus was called the Prince of Peace, and favoured non-violent resistance, there could be circumstances when self-defence, and defence of others, was called for.

Today, we no longer counsel women to put up with abuse from a man; resist him if you can. Don't put up with it. Fight him in court if necessary.

We don't tell oppressed people to resign themselves to being pushed around and impoverished. There are circumstances where active resistance is called for.

Just now, most of us don't blame the Ukrainians for resisting the violent take over of their country by a bully nation, nor advise anyone to put up with bullies. So, yes, we're arming the Ukrainians to fight the Russians.

So forgiveness does not imply passivity toward a perpetrator, who needs to be resisted and stopped.

Non-violent resistance is by far preferable, and it takes a lot of courage to do that, as we saw in the campaigns of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. They endured violence, and never returned it, and their movements, in their situations, were highly successful at achieving greater justice.

But forgiveness does not mean letting the psychopaths take over the world.

Recall Jesus' own words, while being tortured to death on the cross: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

"Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

He did not hate them. He did not hate the Roman governor Pilate, or the Roman soldiers who carried out the order. He did not hate the powerful people of Judea, who plotted to have him gone.

As he died on the cross, he exhibited love toward all of these, his enemies. He had pity for his executioners. He prayed for them, pleaded for them to be forgiven.

He saw their hatred and violence as a kind of ignorance, or "not knowing," a kind of blindness. "They know not what they do."

And I suppose that might often be our attitude toward individuals who act badly.

Sometimes we make allowances for people because they just don't understand, or have had a bad upbringing. We know that certain bad behaviours get passed down through generations; that sometimes people who have been abused, turn out to be abusers of others.

We don't know what has gone on in somebody's life to make them what they are. We have to be careful not to judge.

Sometimes awareness of these things help us to forgive. It's right to make allowances and to regard evil doers with sympathy.

But that does not mean condoning what they do, or letting people get away with murder.

Now we find further insight when we read the most famous of Jesus' parables: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Most of you know it well.

A parable, as you know, is not a story about something that happened once in the past. It's about something that happens all the time, or any time. It's a metaphor of real life, that conveys important truths.

The parable of the "Prodigal Son" is one of three parables that appear together in Luke chapter 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. All three stories are about God's love and grace, about God searching for something, or someone, very precious.

In Luke 15, God is depicted, first, as a shepherd, searching strenuously for just one lost sheep. Then God is depicted as a woman searching and sweeping her house for one precious coin. And then, God is a father, who has lost his dearly beloved son, and welcomes him home with great love and rejoicing.

The general message: God is one who searches for us.

You know the story: a young man demands of his father that he be given his share of the inheritance. He cannot wait for his father to die. He wants the money now.

He is not only 'prodigal', i.e., wasteful and extravagant, he is also disloyal, utterly insensitive to his father's feelings, irresponsible, and foolish.

Perhaps the boy was spoiled, overly indulged; perhaps he was a sparkling, charming personality, a fun loving guy, who always managed to get what he wanted. The apple of his father's eye.

The father must be deeply hurt that his son loves him so little, but for reasons unexplained, the father agrees, and off the boy goes, with his money, into a far country.

There, we are told, he wastes the money on "loose living." When the money runs out, a famine comes along and he is unable to earn a living. He ends up in the most shameful of jobs for a Jewish man, feeding pigs. But he cannot eat as well as the pigs; he is hungry and poor and homeless.

Then he hits bottom. He "comes to himself," as the text says. He has a dawning realization. Oh! Now he sees himself as he really is. He knows that he has sinned against God and against his father. He has no choice but to return home to his father and beg to be forgiven, and taken on as a hired servant.

Now all the while the father is at home, grieving over the loss of his son. Often he sits by the window, looking down the road always hoping that the son will return.

One day, there he is. Emaciated from hunger, weary from his long traveling by foot, clothed in rags, head hung low with shame.

But, as Jesus tells it, “when he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Notice, that the young man has said nothing. He has merely reappeared. No words of repentance have yet been spoken. Just showing up was enough. His father has welcomed him. He knows that his father has forgiven him.

The father sets aside all his hurt, and runs, with no regard for his own dignity, and lavishes his love upon him – a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, the best robe, the fatted calf, and a feast and a party to celebrate.

Here is the picture Jesus gives us of God’s passionate love for us. It’s what we call ‘grace’ – something that cannot be earned, an utterly free gift, something we do not deserve.

Only then, do we hear the young man’s words of repentance: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” He asks only to be one of the hired servants.

You see, the father had already forgiven him. His father had never ceased to love him. Only this repentance made reconciliation possible – that’s the two-way street in which estrangement is overcome.

Notice that forgiveness in this case includes the withdrawal of punishment. He is forgiven and returned to his father’s home as a son. But that doesn’t necessarily mean there were no consequences.

He has already suffered the results of his foolishness. No inheritance remains for the boy. The elder brother will eventually receive the whole of his father’s inheritance. And perhaps he has lost permanently the respect of his elder brother.

Forgiveness doesn’t necessarily mean no consequences. Sometimes, for some people, the consequences include prison, or a divorce, or loss of a job. Being forgiven doesn’t necessarily remove all consequences. Sometimes we have to reap what we sow.

But what about the elder brother, who refuses to join the party to celebrate the prodigal’s return?

His father pleads with his older son to come in and join the celebration, but he refuses, loudly complaining that it’s not fair that his young brother is welcomed home with such love, while he has been here working hard for his father the whole time. They never had a big party for him!

His father expresses appreciation for his elder son’s constant faithfulness and responsibility, assuring him, “You are always with me, and all that I have is yours.”

“But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life, was lost and is found.”

Well, we can sympathize with the elder brother. Isn’t he rather like most of us – most of us good church going people – responsible, dutiful people? Keeps out of trouble. We can identify with that.

He’s understandably resentful about a big celebration for this fool, who has wasted his father’s money “with harlots.”

The story reflects something about Jesus' own practice. It's scandalous really, that Jesus himself, seemed to favour these sinful types, these tax collectors and sinners, and prostitutes, people who were casual about keeping the law. Disreputable people. And generally, poor, marginalized people.

Jesus befriends them, eats with them. He seems to like them. He didn't have much time for those respectable law-abiding Pharisees. That's the scandal of God's grace.

The problem about the elder brothers of this world, is that they're not aware that they too need God's grace and forgiveness; they're blissfully unaware of their own sins of commission or omission, and of their own spiritual need. So they're inclined to judge others.

We have to be careful not to be Pharisees.

This parable expresses so well our basic faith in the love and grace of God.

For us as Christians, Jesus Christ himself, in his teaching and deeds, in his death, and in his resurrection, IS God's love and grace, reaching out to us.

Jesus embodies the love of our Creator, for we are all God's beloved daughters and sons, and in Christ, God runs out to meet us, and embrace us, with an inexhaustible love that will never let us go.

Thanks be to God! Amen.