



Forgiveness

Week 3: Forgiving Ourselves

Lori Lampert - 05/28/2023

We sing at the end of every service the words Jesus spoke in the Gospel of Mark. They are what he answered when asked by one of the religious leaders of the day “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus gives him the first and then adds the second in reply, for they are inextricably linked. Out of the first, we are able to do the second.

Mark 12

²⁸ **One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”** ²⁹ **Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’** ³⁰ **you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’** ³¹ **The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

I can barely read this scripture without skipping or attempting to waltz as I do each week from the joy of our benediction song. I love it. But let me tell you about a problem I had for more years than I can count. I completely understood the first commandment Jesus spoke. Love God with all my being. My struggle was with the whole love your neighbor as yourself. No, not that I am to love my neighbor. I get that. But that I am to do so *as I love myself*. Here was the giant stumbling block for me. The need to love myself. The need to not only accept my faults and mistakes but to get beyond mere acceptance to forgiveness. To move beyond oh well, I am a sinner, you are a sinner, we

are all sinners so I guess there is nothing to do about that. Maybe just end the quote with you shall love your neighbor and forget about the as yourself part. Which, frankly, is what I did. For years and years.

Yet the thing is, the same need to forgive others extends to the need to forgive ourselves. Listen to this quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter the Reverend Mpho Tutu in their important work, which I highly recommend, *The Book of Forgiving*.

Forgiveness is the way we return what has been taken from us and restore the love and kindness and trust that has been lost. With each act of forgiveness, whether small or great, we move toward wholeness. Forgiveness is nothing less than how we bring peace to ourselves and our world.

Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu *The Book of Forgiving*

Moving toward wholeness, moving toward peace are the blessings of forgiveness. And yet, far too often we deny ourselves the opportunity to be restored, to sit in the light of God's love and let its full impact move in and through us. So today, let's talk about one of the most difficult relationships to transform—the one you have with yourself.

You missed the last conversation with someone you loved. Someone died and you feel in some way responsible. Words sprang from your mouth that deeply wounded another. The opportunity was there for you to step in and step up, and instead you walked away. There was violence in your home and your nine-year-old self couldn't stop it, but you have long believed it was your fault.

And other times the cause is deep inside and is difficult to name. You were brought up to believe you were a mistake, and your voice was silenced. You have always felt less than and unworthy of forgiveness. When you have made a mistake it stays with you, replaying in your mind and growing and growing until forgiveness feels impossible.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Loving yourself means forgiving yourself.

Consider the Apostle Peter. We looked at this story the week after Easter. Look at it again from the lens of a person who betrayed the One who loved him unconditionally. From Luke chapter 22:

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

The Lord turned and looked at Peter. The one who said that even if everyone else disowns Jesus he would die for him. The guy who was the first to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. The disciple who walked on water with Jesus. Peter who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain top. The man who even asked how often he had to forgive. How was Peter ever to forgive himself for this betrayal?

But remember the words at the cross: "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." These words of Jesus were true for the Roman soldiers and are true for Peter and are true for you and me. Forgive. Forgive others. Forgive yourself.

Lack of self-forgiveness has as much potential to do harm as does the lack of forgiveness for others. And words from Desmond and Mpho Tutu:

People who genuinely seek to forgive themselves are people who want to change. They don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Make no mistake, we must be accountable for our actions, but when we stay stuck in the unhappy story of what we have done—when we make an identity out of our past actions—we deny ourselves the gift of transformation.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu

Hear this again, self-forgiveness does not deny the truth—it is a bold truth. Self-forgiveness is not self-flagellation—it is accepting your humanity and seeking a new story. It is learning from our past and changing our future.

It may involve humility and owning our mistakes, seeking forgiveness from another if we have hurt them. Self-forgiveness is easier when you have been forgiven, but that may or may not ever happen.

And remember these words:

We do not heal in isolation. Connecting with others is how we develop compassion for others and for ourselves.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu

How did Peter know he was forgiven? He was entrusted by Jesus with the task of caring for what God cares the most about, God's people. How did he forgive himself? He took up the cross and carried it.

Peter preached a sermon by the power of the Holy Spirit that led to 3,000 people being saved. He led the church in Jerusalem and the leaders who would carry the gospel story. He healed the crippled man and brought him into the Temple. He was arrested and ultimately taken prisoner to Rome where he was martyred on an upside down cross, for tradition says he did not believe he was worthy to die in the same way as Jesus. It is believed his bones lie today under the altar of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Healing does not happen in isolation. We are meant to walk this path of forgiveness at our own pace, and in the company of others.

Let me share with you a story once again that has stayed with me and I've told before. I went to Washington DC several years ago with my friend Stacie. We were determined to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture. It is part of the Smithsonian and opened in 2016. From the outside it looks very different from the marble and concrete facades of so many other museums. It was designed to look like a ship. The website said there were no tickets available, but we took a chance anyway and were able to get in.

The lower three floors are dedicated to history and so we began the tour by riding an elevator down to the lowest floor where we would walk our way up through the centuries.

When we exited the elevator, we entered into a darkened space with displays from the history of enslavement. The taking of people from their families and land, loading them into the hulls of ships like cords of firewood, and bringing them thousands of miles away across the ocean. They were chained, starved, raped, then discarded. Often less than half of the people survived to be sold into a life of slavery for themselves and their children.

As a Christian, a white woman of European descent who has always led a life of privilege and freedom, I was overwhelmed with grief.

On one wall was engraved these words from **Olaudah Equiano 1789**

O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?

Then I turned and saw a replica of the hull of a slave ship with a depiction of how the enslaved people were laid out. Literally laid out.. I inhaled a deep gut breath and let it out with a shudder. Suddenly, I felt an arm wrap around me. It was a beautiful black woman and she was holding me. She leaned into me and said, "Are you OK?"

I replied, "No. I am so very sad and so very sorry."

She gave me a squeeze, nodded, and we moved on.

Forgiveness? Self-forgiveness? I don't know exactly what happened in those moments other than it was holy, it was grace-filled. She helped me acknowledge that I was right to feel grief. And the responsibility of receiving forgiveness of my own culpability in continuing harm so that I can better love my neighbor as I learn to love myself.

And maybe sharing this once again will help you and I to move forward and write a different story. For there will still be moments when we are hurt and moments when we do the hurting.

There are still times ahead when our words will cut someone's heart, and when the words of another will pierce our own soul. There will still be days when we find ourselves angry and have to fight the need to get even.

The path of forgiveness is one we will walk over and over again each time we are injured, each time we injure another, and it will never be easy. But this is how the world heals, one relationship at a time, one soul at a time, until the world is transformed.

Brene Brown writes these words.

"We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them – we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.

Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare."

Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection

So I invite you to set a moment, a place, a time when you will acknowledge that you are loved. You are forgiven. Write down what you need to acknowledge. Share it with a trusted friend. Say it out loud in a safe space.

Give yourself permission to move forward from this time. The words of Maya Angelou have long helped me do so. I repeat them often. They are simple and profound:

"I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better."

Maya Angelou

When you find thoughts of condemnation and shame creeping back into your mind, revisit your decision time and place to forgive yourself. Your stance is one of placing one foot in front of the other. Forward motion. Healing movement. Progress. A transformed life.

And perhaps most important of all as a follower of Jesus Christ, as a beloved Child of God, *use* what you have learned. Extend compassion. Listen more closely. Guard your tongue. In the words of St. Francis, seek more to understand than to be understood. When you find the weeping, shuddering person alone, perhaps it will be you God will use to do something as simple as ask "Are you OK?" and then let them share their grief with you.

For me, the first shift began to happen when I was in my mid 30s. A friend gave me a small book. I don't remember what was inside. I put it on a shelf that I walked by every day for a few weeks. Its title was "You are the Beloved." The book kept catching my eye. As if it had a light on it. I know it sounds strange, but it was as if the Holy Spirit was calling to me. You are the beloved. I was beloved. Me. Lori. With all I had done in the past, with all the mistakes yet to be made, with all the big and small things that I could not change, I was beloved. Beloved. By God. By the creator of the universe. And I began to open up to what has become a truth for me and I pray you will claim for yourself. We are the beloved children of the most high God.

Let me close with these words from Psalm 32 as our prayer today:

Psalm 32

Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be— you get a fresh start, your slate's wiped clean.

Count yourself lucky— God holds nothing against you and you're holding nothing back from him.

When I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans.

The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up.

Then I let it all out; I said, "I'll come clean about my failures to God."

Suddenly the pressure was gone— my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared.

These things add up.

Every one of us needs to pray; when all hell breaks loose and the dam bursts we'll be on high ground, untouched.

God's my island hideaway, keeps danger far from the shore, throws garlands of hosannas around my neck.

Let me give you some good advice; I'm looking you in the eye and giving it to you straight.

"Don't be ornery like a horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to stay on track."

God-defiers are always trouble; God-affirmers find themselves loved every time they turn around.

Celebrate God Sing together—everyone! All you honest hearts, raise the roof!