

11/10/2024 - Forgiveness

When I am developing a message, to begin with I start worrying that I don't have enough to say and then have too much and have to start chucking stuff. I had my message pretty much done but then thought I wonder what George Fox had to say about forgiveness so Googled George Fox on forgiveness. I did not get what I thought I would get but found a surprise. I got a link to "Digital Commons George Fox University-Forgiveness, Chapter 2 of the Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church by Mark R. McMinn." I didn't use any of it but it is excellent. How to get to the document is in the bulletin and I highly recommend you read the 26 pages.

Forgiveness: I always try to be a month ahead on my messages so had picked forgiveness as my topic before I gave my last message on anger. During the quiet time after my anger message the topic of forgiveness came up frequently, so it is timely.

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful things in the world and one of the most difficult. Can you imagine a Palestinian saying to an Israeli, "My son was a paramedic? You purposely rocketed the ambulance he was riding in on his way to help victims at the hospital you bombed. Our house is gone and 2 other members of my family are dead because of you. I forgive you." Or "My daughter was at the music festival. You killed two members of her family, took her hostage and we just heard that she is dead. I forgive you." Those scenarios are almost beyond comprehension, yet if there is ever going to be peace in that area forgiveness has to be part of the solution. Illogical Christ like forgiveness is the only way out. I think the best we can hope for is an end to the hostilities which is not peace but a step. Ultimately the goal has to be two steps beyond the end to hostilities, forgiveness and then reconciliation. That will take a miracle.

Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler connects forgiveness and restorative justice: *We are asked to choose which world we want to live in—a world of retributive justice or a world of forgiveness. We can't operate in both orders. And when the world of revenge enters the renewed creation, the order built on good news, it poisons the possibility of mutuality, transformation, and reconciliation. The way out of the endless loop of retribution is to recognize that forgiveness of individuals is interwoven with the social order of God's reign.*

Theologian Karl Barth, reflecting on forgiveness, writes, *"Living by forgiveness is never by any means passivity, but Christian living in full activity."*

It is noteworthy that Barth says forgiveness is not passivity. It is not "roll over and die". We must hold the offender accountable but let go of vengeance and retribution.

According to the world, forgiveness works like this. You offend someone. You ask for their forgiveness. The offended person decides whether you are worthy of forgiveness based on the sincerity of your plea relative to the seriousness of the offence and you are required to do something proportionate to make amends.

Jesus turns all of that on its head and frankly I don't think we like it. Matthew 18: 21-22 - Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister 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 (or in some versions, seven times seventy)."

Seven times seventy is another way of saying there must be no limit on forgiveness. Come on Jesus, get real. If we do that we will just get taken advantage of.

John 20: 19-23 - ¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Wait a minute. How messed up is that Jesus? The disciples totally bailed on you. When the going got tough and their dreams of inheriting positions of power and glory were dashed they ran. "Peace be with you." You should have said, "Repent you bunch of jerks. Get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness." Jesus does none of that. No recrimination. No berating. Total forgiveness and they didn't even say they were sorry.

Holding grudges. We have the power to do that. Have you ever stuck it to someone that offended you? It can be as small as giving them the cold shoulder or silent treatment. It is hard to let go and forgive.

I think I was 12. My sister did something mean and it hurt so I told her I hated her. A day later she came to me and told me she was sorry. I told her to go away, I still hate you. I got this feeling of power and control over my sister. I was sticking it to her. It felt good. I had a hold on her and wasn't about to let go. When Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained," He is telling us we can withhold forgiveness but everything he did in the locked room tells us don't withhold, forgive. Forgive unconditionally. Jesus teaches by doing.

Forgiveness is not only for the benefit of the offender but it is also to restore the wholeness of the offended. Unforgiveness is like acid. It destroys the container it is held in.

To the woman caught in adultery Jesus says, "Has no one condemned you? Neither do I. Go and sin no more." Shouldn't Jesus have said, "You lucked out this time? I saved your bacon. Say you're sorry and do two days of community service at the homeless shelter."

Friends of a paralytic desperate to get him to Jesus can't enter the room because it is too crowded so they cut a hole in the roof and lower the man placing him at the feet of Jesus, in Mark 2:5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven."

What the heck Jesus. The fellow didn't even come seeking forgiveness. He wanted healing. Just because you saw he needed forgiveness too doesn't mean you should have freely given it. Did he say he was sorry? Nope. Did he say he will mend his ways? Nope. Really, Jesus!

The prodigal son tells his father he is tired of waiting for him to die and wants his inheritance now. He only returns because he is starving. He is rehearsing a phony "I am sorry speech" when his father runs to greet him and before the son can even get his fake confession out of his mouth, Dad throws a huge welcome back party. Really?

Have you ever done good and then had it thrown back at you? "I was just trying to help." "Well it made it worse; we don't need your help." Have you ever been rejected? Ever been humiliated? Taunted? Made fun of? It hurts. When that has happened to me I want to strike back. Get even.

Mark 15: 29-32 - Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

What is Jesus's response?

Luke 23:34 - "Father, forgive them: they do not know what they are doing." Be honest. Jesus' statement makes absolutely no sense. The Chief priests mocking you on the cross, the soldiers that scourged you, don't they have to say they are sorry first? Don't they need to do some kind of penance to prove their sorrow? Richard Rohr says this, "I once saw God's mercy as patient, benevolent tolerance, a kind of grudging forgiveness, but now mercy has become God's very self-understanding, a loving allowing, a willing breaking of the rules by the One who made the rules, a firm and joyful taking of our hand while we clutch our sins and gaze at God in desire and disbelief."

Martin Luther King said this, “Few words in the New Testament more clearly and solemnly express the magnanimity of Jesus’ spirit than that sublime utterance from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”. This is love at its best.

The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of revenge. Humanity has never risen above the injunction of the *lex talionis*: (lex tal e on is) “Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, people continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path.

Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with forceful love.

What a magnificent lesson! Generations will rise and fall; people will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation; but ever and again this noble lesson of Calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate. FORGIVE.

In 2006 a shooting at an Amish school left 10 children dead. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family (the family of the killer) to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls and Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts’ funeral.

It’s important here to clarify what the Amish believe forgiveness is and is not.

- It’s not pretending that nothing happened or that the offense wasn’t so bad.
- It’s not a pardon; it’s not saying there should be no consequences for actions. Had Charles Roberts lived, the Amish no doubt would have supported his prosecution and imprisonment for the sake of everyone’s safety.
- Instead, forgiveness is about giving up: giving up your right to revenge. And giving up feelings of resentment, bitterness and hatred, replacing them with compassion toward the offender. And treating the offender as a fellow human being.

What the Amish did was difficult. For years they dealt with pain, loss and many needed counseling. Following Jesus is not supposed to be easy.

In all honesty Jesus doesn’t make sense. He doesn’t follow our rules. He isn’t anything like the God that much of Christianity has created in its image and likeness. How can God so lavishly

and freely forgive? A clue might be in the line, “for they know not what they do.” The chief priests thought they were doing what was best for Judaism.

You hear about a horrendous crime committed by someone and think what a monster. Later you find out the person was severely abused, neglected, bullied and abandoned as a child. You start to see the person in a different light. God sees all of us in a different light because God’s sees the light within.

God’s forgiveness is too lavish and too generous. There should be conditions and strings attached. I don’t understand.

St. Augustine of Hippo said, “If you understand it, it isn’t God”.