

Is Forgiveness The Same For Everyone?

Forgiveness I

July 13, 2008

^{NLT} **Genesis 4:1** Now Adam slept with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When the time came, she gave birth to Cain, and she said, "With the LORD's help, I have brought forth a man!" ² Later she gave birth to a second son and named him Abel. When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain was a farmer. ³ At harvesttime Cain brought to the LORD a gift of his farm produce, ⁴ while Abel brought several choice lambs from the best of his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, ⁵ but he did not accept Cain and his offering. This made Cain very angry and dejected. ⁶ "Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected?" ⁷ You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it." ⁸ Later Cain suggested to his brother, Abel, "Let's go out into the fields." And while they were there, Cain attacked and killed his brother. ⁹ Afterward the LORD asked Cain, "Where is your brother? Where is Abel?" "I don't know!" Cain retorted. "Am I supposed to keep track of him wherever he goes?" ¹⁰ But the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen-- your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! ¹¹ You are hereby banished from the ground you have defiled with your brother's blood. ¹² No longer will it yield abundant crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be a homeless fugitive on the earth, constantly wandering from place to place." ¹³ Cain replied to the LORD, "My punishment is too great for me to bear! ¹⁴ You have banished me from my land and from your presence; you have made me a wandering fugitive. All who see me will try to kill me!" ¹⁵ The LORD replied, "They will not kill you, for I will give seven times your punishment to anyone who does." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him.

^{NLT} **Luke 23:32** Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. ³³ Finally, they came to a place called The Skull. All three were crucified there-- Jesus on the center cross, and the two criminals on either side. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. ³⁵ The crowd watched, and

the leaders laughed and scoffed. "He saved others," they said, "let him save himself if he is really God's Chosen One, the Messiah." ³⁶ The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. ³⁷ They called out to him, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ A signboard was nailed to the cross above him with these words: "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself-- and us, too, while you're at it!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you are dying? ⁴¹ We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." ⁴³ And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." ⁴⁴ By this time it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock.

The hardest words to say may well be these three, "I *forgive you.*"

Then the surprising response you have heard or spoken, "What do you mean?" "Don't say it unless you mean it!" "I don't need forgiveness, you do."

That is the question. Who needs forgiveness and why? Who is the offended person? Who is the offender? Do both the offended party and the offending party need forgiveness? What do you do if the other person does not come to you to ask for forgiveness? What is your obligation? Do you need justice before an act of forgiveness can or should occur from your side? What qualifies forgiveness as an act of grace? What if the offending party is deceased, such as the case with the Nazi leaders who disturbed the world with the brutal and callous slaying of 6 million human beings in WW II?

Does forgiveness mean the same to everyone? Do Jews, Muslims and Christians speak the same language when saying the words of forgiveness?

In a recent interfaith dialogue, with a UM Bishop, an Episcopal bishop, two Rabbis, two Imams, several other Protestant clergy, lay people of the faiths, and the Executive Director of the Virginia Council of Churches, the group decided to ask questions of each other, questions that each has wanted to ask the other but had either not had the opportunity or had been hesitant, maybe even afraid to ask. Of all the questions that surfaced, the top vote getter was “***Forgiveness.***” So we put it on our agenda immediately to ask each other what “forgiveness means in our respective faith bodies and how “forgiveness” as defined is practiced? This simply means to us today that forgiveness is on our minds in our different faiths in different ways. Let’s see what it means.

First, I chose two passages that cry out in the Old Testament and New Testament for forgiveness. One is the familiar Cain and Abel story in the book of Genesis and the other is the request from Jesus on the cross to his heavenly father.

In looking at these passages along side of the central verse of the *Lord’s Prayer*, “*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,*” I **imagined** an image of a **door** that opens and closes, letting

people in or out, or locking someone out also. Either way – locked to keep out or open to invite in – there is a lot of power in this door that opens or closes us out of or invites us more deeply into life. Alas, when a door that is locked, it may also lock someone inside as well as lock someone out also, right? This door that opens us to life is **like forgiveness** that gives us entrance to the joy and the presence of God in the Kingdom of God. Maybe the most familiar image is the one that is often quoted from Revelation 3:20, *"Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends."* The **one** standing at the door on the outside seeking entrance surprisingly is the risen Christ, our Lord. The question is, "Who is on the other side of that closed door?" Is the door locked or open? Is there a need for a key or a pass word to open the door and allow the other to enter?

Today, as I begin this series and try to keep in touch with this metaphor of the "***door***" in relation to the notion of "***forgiveness***," I want to focus on what forgiveness means to Christians? At the same time, it is important to see how the language we use in Christian tradition is different than that used in Judaism, for example. As we develop an understanding of the differences in meaning and practice, then we will know more about what is unique and critical in our own belief about Christian forgiveness.

At this recent dialogue, after each faith group from Judaism, Islam and Christianity spoke, we concluded one thing quickly. It is this, **Christians** believe in an “**unconditional**” forgiveness; and **Jewish and Muslim** believers follow a more “**conditional**” forgiveness. In all cases, the reason for forgiveness is that someone has offended another – either God or another human being. There is an **offender** and a person or even God who has been **offended**. The result is a sense of hurt, brokenness and possibly separation. Separation from God is at the top of the ladder in priorities of offense. What can free us from human to human offenses and what can pardon us from an offense against God?

The Cain and Abel story is an ancient story that has both offenses at work. Cain offends God with an improper sacrifice and then murder of his brother, Abel. Cain also offends his brother, Abel. Cain covets what Abel has received in blessing from God; and then the offenses build with murder, lying and self-deceit. The story concludes not with death for Cain, but *redemption*, yet not escaping consequences.

There is that masterful attempt at deception from responsibility and consequences that comes out of the mouth of Cain. Who can ever forget these words, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” The **door closes between Cain and Abel**. That is the power of sin and death. Sin violates the divine laws

that hold us together in compassionate care for each other as fellow human beings, created by the one and same God. Despair and the power of fear is not the final word here. God places a **mark** upon the forehead of Cain, this jealous killer. No one but God can take his life. Yet, Cain must be responsible for his actions.

In the **New Testament** we hear those famous words uttered in the last moments of Jesus' earthly life, spoken as a prayer of a son to a heavenly father out of deep wounding and a deeper yet source of compassion for those who have caused this cross to become the instrument of his death. "*Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing.*" Then, in an unbelievable act of **mercy**, beyond any measure of obligation under Jewish laws, Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross to his side, who asked to be remembered in his kingdom, he said, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom...*" 43 *And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."* (Luke 23:42-43)

The door of God's Kingdom House is open, even to the convicted felon. There is an act of mercy and forgiveness that **extends** from that cross of the convicted repentant sinner to every human being in every age of every nation, social status and color. **God forgives** and breaks the power of sin and death by raising Jesus from the dead. He becomes for us Christian believers,

the Christ who opens the doors of heaven where love, mercy and grace abound.

This is “*unconditional forgiveness*” that underscores any concept or act of forgiving each other of our offenses. It begins with God’s act of mercy and love in Jesus from the cross. Everything that this act extends toward is affected because God loves us first to this great degree of sacrifice. This is the very essence of God love or agape-love. How often do we love is reflected in the eternal presence and hope of the love of Jesus for all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is not a matter of how much or how often. It is simply an ongoing state of a relationship with Jesus. We turn to God in response for the joy and hope of our own forgiveness. This in turn compels us to live as forgiven people toward those who need forgiveness and may not in our estimation deserve it. The door is open. The door is large. The door does not have a secret password or a special key that fits only that door. The door opens when we respond to the one who invites us into the kingdom for all sinners, harlots, tax collectors. It is as Charles Wesley declared that joy that sings out, *O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemers praise...*

The Jewish tradition is coming from a different perspective. It is a “**conditional**” expression of “*forgiveness.*” The door opens and closes in a

different sort of way. It may be that once we think about this, we might find ourselves practicing conditional forgiveness more than the unconditional forgiveness taught through Jesus' words and actions.

Jewish **tradition** presents a door that must be entered through the actions primarily of the offender on the other side. The door can be opened from one human to another. But, if the offense is against God, then only God can forgive. Ellie Wiesel on the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust said that he could not forgive and prayed that God not have mercy on the Nazis because they did not deserve it.

In a contrasting manner, Eva Cor, a Jewish holocaust survivor of the brutal experiments of Dr. Mengele in Auschwitz Death Camp, upon identical twins, offered her forgiveness not only to Dr. Mengele, but also to all the Nazis. Her Jewish survivors who were also at the same camp and operated upon by the same evil Dr. Mengele derided and denounced her actions. Why?

This is a different type of door to enter in Jewish acts of forgiveness. For an offending party to receive forgiveness from the one who has been hurt, there are certain clear requirements to be met. *Teshuva* or "**repentance**" is the key to the Jewish view. Five elements are important: recognition of one's sins as sins, remorse, desisting from sin, restitution where possible,

and confession. When repentance that is rooted in love happens, then there will be a sincere effort at desisting from sinful action. When someone sins against another, the sinner incurs an obligation to right the wrong. This is a **debt** toward the offended party. Sin disrupts our lives, our relationships, our social institutions, and even ourselves! But, sin also disrupts our relationship with God. Rabbinic teaching suggests that all these elements of repentance (*teshuva*) are necessary.

The most basic type of forgiveness is “*foregoing the other’s indebtedness*.” If there is sincerity in repentance, then the person who is offended should offer a pardon. However, this does **not** mean there has to be a **reconciliation** of the heart. As an example, if a woman is beaten and battered by her husband, she is not obligated to grant him a pardon unless, 1) the husband has stopped all abusive activity, 2) reformed his character through remorse, restitution, and confession, 3) and has actually asked for forgiveness several times. Only after **being certain** there is **sincerity** in repentance would a person be morally bound, not legally, to offer pardon (Mechila).

On **another** level, there is a forgiveness that is an act of the **heart**, when a person achieves **empathy for the troubledness** of the other. This is

not reconciliation; but it is awareness that the other is human and frail and deserving of sympathy.

The third level of forgiveness in Judaism is “*atonement*” or “*purification*.” This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. This form of forgiveness is only granted by God. No person can atone for another. This is why many of the Jewish rabbis criticized Eva Cor. She could not grant forgiveness to everyone in such a blanket form.

The door is conditionally opened in Judaism and Islam for forgiveness and a possible entry back into relationship, if there is true *teshuva* *repentance*. This is the very basic step to be taken, otherwise no forgiveness can begin.

Christian forgiveness is a bit fuzzy at times. At times we lay out expectations to a proper forgiveness. At times we have resentment toward those who we deem undeserving and label Jesus as simplistic and naive. Quite frequently, Christians are operating out of an “eye for an eye, tooth for tooth” concept that is more vengeful than merciful. At other times it seems to require nothing from the offender and everything from the offended. But, that is not true. There can be forgiveness and still require accountability. Forgiveness is not cheap grace. When grace and love extend to us as ones

needing forgiveness, then we must **begin to live as one who is forgiven.**

The story in the Bible about the king who forgives a servant of a huge debt is like that of Christ for us. The servant had no way of repaying the debts. So, the king forgave him and sent him on his way. However, this forgiven servant reacts differently to a fellow servant. When asked to forgive a much smaller debt, the servant of the larger forgiven debt refuses and sends his servant into jail. At this point the story changes dramatically, because the king holds his servant accountable for the unforgiving ways of this man. Instead of enjoying the forgiving nature of the king, now this unforgiving servant finds he has no forgiveness at all. It is taken back.

This must remind us that **forgiveness is the central quality** of an *open door community of faith*. We **are** the forgiven people. We gather to celebrate and rejoice in being God's liberated and forgiven people. But, this puts the **yoke** upon us to partner with Jesus to forgive others, even if the offending person seems undeserving. The body of Christ, in which we stand and affirm our faith, is always a body of forgiven forgivers. The heart of the message is that God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that whoever should believe in him would not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) Eternal life is the life of the new age that begins at this very moment of forgiveness! This forgiven body is not an exclusive club of a

narrow few. It is a larger house of mercy **than** even the most fervent Christian can imagine, **because** it is God's imagination, not mine, nor yours that opens the door.

This, of course, is only a start, a beginning, not the final chapter of our life in witness for the one who lived, died and was resurrected for us. Jesus Christ is God's sacrifice of love that not only covers all sin; it breaks the power that sin has over humanity once and for all. Jesus need not be re-sacrificed ever again on the cross.

Next week, what does forgiveness mean to the one who is the **offender**, standing in need of mercy? Then, we will come back to the one who is the **offended** and is put on call to be an ongoing witness for Christ as an agent of God's forgiving power. The power of forgiveness is a power that sets us free and releases us from the cloths of death.

Is the **door open or closed** for you today? Do you feel locked out of mercy and joy and hope? Today, I invite you to respond in your heart to the **open door** of God's forgiving mercy. It is Lord's invitation to enter into the hospitality of God's house and kingdom. My hope is built on nothing less.
(Sing vss. 1 & 4, #368, UM Hymnal) Amen.

