

*What Does Forgiveness Mean to the Forgiver?*

Isaiah 43:10-25; Luke 5:17-24

Series on Forgiveness -- #3

July 27, 2008

**Isaiah 43:10-25** <sup>10</sup> You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. <sup>11</sup> I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. <sup>12</sup> I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses, says the LORD. <sup>13</sup> I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it? <sup>14</sup> Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. <sup>15</sup> I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. <sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup> who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: <sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. <sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, <sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. <sup>22</sup> Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! <sup>23</sup> You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. <sup>24</sup> You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. <sup>25</sup> I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

**Luke 5:17-24** <sup>17</sup> One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of

the Lord was with him to heal. <sup>18</sup> Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; <sup>19</sup> but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. <sup>20</sup> When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." <sup>21</sup> Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>22</sup> When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? <sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? <sup>24</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to **forgive** sins"-- he said to the one who was paralyzed-- "I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."

Who needs forgiveness more – the **offending** person or **the offended/the victim**– the one who has been **wronged**? What role does “*forgiveness*” play in the church family? How does it happen? When does it not happen?

These are questions that I have been pondering on this theme of *forgiveness*. The **first** sermon in this series focused on what does *forgiveness* **mean** for Christianity in contrast to the Jewish tradition. The **second** sermon dealt with *forgiveness* to the offending party – the one who wrongs or sins against another, especially against God. Now this **third** sermon is about the impact of *forgiveness* on the forgiver.

The holy Scriptures of the New Testament are full of references to *forgive* and to be *forgiven*. We cannot escape their powerful presence and message, which comes directly from Jesus to all of us believers. It is,

however, probably the hardest thing to do – to *forgive* and to *forget*. Is it possible to be controlled by the memory of hurt and pain? Jesus words do not address memory, only the action of forgiving. But he heals the power of remembering.

<sup>36</sup> *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* <sup>37</sup> *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. **Forgive**, and you will be forgiven;* <sup>38</sup> *give, and it will be given to you. (Luke 6:36-38a)*

Jesus taught us how to pray about *forgiving*.

<sup>2</sup> *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* <sup>13</sup> *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* <sup>14</sup> *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;* <sup>15</sup> *but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:12-15)*

Jesus is asked the critical question about how often a believer forgives. His answer is filled with grace beyond our comprehension.

<sup>21</sup> *Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* <sup>22</sup> *Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:20-22)*

After the resurrection, Jesus comes into the room in his appearance to them and says,

*, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>*

*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:20-23)*

The Apostle Peter's first sermon on Pentecost Day made *forgiveness central* to God's *salvation lived out* in us as followers.

*<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:37-38)*

And in his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul instructs them on *forgiveness*.

*<sup>31</sup> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup> and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)*

To the Collosians he gave a baptismal formula. When a new believer rises from the water of baptism, he or she is to become a new creature in God's new creation.

*<sup>12</sup> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14)*

If there is one word that reveals the depth of **God's love** and **compassion** toward us as God's children, it is this powerful word, ***forgiveness***. It is the central point of the ***Lord's Prayer***, which Jesus taught his disciples. We say it on Sunday in worship, in weddings, in funerals, in meetings, and at home when we are with our family or when we are alone feeling confused and unable to say words of our own to God. We say, "*Our father, who art in heaven...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...*"

The word is a part of the ***Apostles' Creed***...*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness*

*of sins...* This is an essential element in our declaration of faith about who we are as the body of Christ.

There are only so many options that any human being can take when wronged or hurt. **One** is the way of retaliation and revenge. This may be the most often used response. It reveals our pain and the need to “**get even**” for a wrong or an injustice. Revenge is a violent response. Revenge is an external action toward the offender. We respond to hurt by hurting, verbally or physically, but quickly and strongly to show who is in control.

Lynn McQuinn, whose husband was one of the 3 thousand plus who died in the Twin Towers on 9/11, has been working to establish a “*Garden of Forgiveness*” at ground zero. She says, “Thought processes move from ‘I have been wronged’ to ‘I would like to embrace another idea – instead of war, instead of hate, bias, or prejudice.’ These are things we need not be teaching our children.”

In Belfast, North Ireland, in 1973, 6 men were killed and 6 wounded – all were unarmed. They were allegedly shot from the top of a nearby building by the British military. Thirty years later nephews and grandchildren are telling this story with deep bitterness and resentment. Violence does not end. Robert Enright of the University of Wisconsin said that “remembering passes on to children.”

Revenge is way that many in this world operate; and there are elaborate and complicated codes in many countries to hand out proper revenge. Is this **the option** for the Christian community?

**Another** option is an internal action to the one who is offended. The wronged person can internalize the offense with its pain, hurt and scarring. Instead of lashing out and getting even, anger and hurt turn inside upon itself. It festers, it eats away our insides, and it tears us down with resentment and revenge that will not be absolved. This is a way that we feed on our hurts; wear them like a badge on our clothing. We do not let them go; instead, these wounds of the heart remain locked up inside to smolder like a campfire that does not go out or like a **deadly virus** that eventually poisons our entire spiritual being.

This deadly and self destructive internalizing of the offense committed against us could result in disaster at any moment. With an implosion, we destroy our own life from within. Judgment falls back upon us with bitterness toward others. Or, we lash out in a way that builds up like a volcanic eruption. Submerged feelings cut loose and damage people and relationships in the wake. The result of this internalizing of anger toward another and the unwillingness to forgive is engaging in self-destructive means, such as drugs and alcohol abuse.

One of the key elements of *forgiveness* is the journey of forgiving yourself. Alexandra Asseily in the film, *The Power of Forgiveness*, observes the high personal stress in Beirut, Lebanon that needs release. The people and the city have its own journey. *A Garden of Forgiveness* is a reminder that if we are going to take the journey of peace, we have to cross the bridge of *forgiveness*. We need to forgive ourselves for all that is wicked and wrong inside us. We would then be so much more compassionate with others. The lack of compassion with ourselves makes us so upset with others. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself.

The elder brother could not find peace in the parable that Jesus gave of the Prodigal son. He could not forgive his younger brother for leaving home and returning in disgrace. But he also might not have been able to forgive himself for the feelings he had toward his father and his brother also.

**Another possible way** the offended person to respond to hurt is through a healthy spiritual release of the negative destructive force working against us. We may not realize until it is almost too late that this unbearable burden of hurt and anger is a force that wraps its death like arms around our heart and mind. It needs **release** for our own health as well as for the healing of the other. If we find **no** release, the sore on our sole only gets worse and worse. It affects our mental and physical health.

Recent research shows that a person who has not forgiven another will have a spike in their blood pressure whenever the offending person's name is recalled. That puts the unforgiving person at higher risk of suffering a stroke. Health can breakdown because of this unresolved hurt. It colors life black and dark. No *forgiveness* can be found in this place. Certainly there is no place to "*forgive and forget*" either.

If there is another way, it will not be easy. The more natural and knee jerk responses so often seen in the world is like the first two attitudes. The Bible gives us an understanding that *forgiveness* is primarily an action of God. It is an action that becomes part of each of us in a Christian community when we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The cross is the symbol of a power that has been conquered. Death is this seemingly unconquerable power. But, death no longer can hold its grip on us. The love of Jesus offers a power to heal. It is the divine power of *forgiveness*.

This means that the church is a forgiven *community of forgivers*. No better example can be found that journey of forgiveness that began in a tragic way on **October 2, 2006** in Lancaster, PA. Charles Robbins came into a small school house and opened fire on the children of the Amish community, killing 5 and wounding 5 others. The Amish don't argue with God; and they have a strange and deep sense of acceptance. As the families

started their journey of recovery, they said that they needed to go over to the Robbins family to forgive them. It is said that the Amish do this as a community, arising every morning realizing that all the emotions are there from grief to pain. They don't need to retaliate. Their community supports one another in this biblical belief and it helps them to heal.

The very hard part of healing in *forgiveness* is “**forgetting**.” This is the power of memory. Dr. Everett Worthington of VCU has done research that shows that holding onto grudges is harmful and that *forgiveness* is good for your health. *Forgiveness drains the hurting power of memory* but does not erase the memory. Hurt is not the final word in the Bible. The risen Christ conquers this horrible power of death. Most of what we see in culture is violence, an eye for an eye. So we must ask ourselves, “What is the alternative?”

It starts with our children. We teach them that there is no barrier to *forgiveness*. *Forgiveness* is not reasonable; but it is a divine necessity. God has broken down the walls of hostility and made peace possible. We can teach our children about the power of *forgiveness* when we offer the concept of inherent worth and dignity of the other person, because, you see, they are a member of the human family. No one is beyond God's redemption. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

A Fullbright scholar, Amy Biel, went to Capetown, South Africa. She was brutally killed there during those troubling times of resistance to Apartheid. Her parents came from California to attend an amnesty hearing. The Biel family met with the parents of the murderers who stoned Amy to death. They declared their willingness to forgive these gangsters. And, instead of retribution, they established the Amy Biel Foundation to help youth to avoid violence and to develop their potential. *Forgiveness* for them was **not cheap**. Neither is the cross cheap grace for the believers. We live now as one who has been forgiven not by another human but by God's mercy and love from the cross. This love is a divine gift. It is **agape love**.

Let's sing about this gift. *There's a song of love in my heart; love is a gift from Jesus. There's a song of love in my heart; love is a gift from God. Alleluia! Love in my heart is singing praises. Alleluia! Love is a gift from God.*