

Title: The Grace of Forgiveness

Text: Mark 8:1-8, 2nd Sun. of Advent (Peace)

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus, and Mark's Gospel introduces forgiveness as a key part of the preaching of John the Baptist. John was a desert prophet. He lived in the desert, dressed in desert clothes, ate desert food, and preached in the desert, by the Jordan. Mark says with a bit of exaggeration, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him." He proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And many who came out to hear him went through the waters of baptism confessing their sins.

The Greek word for "repent" means "to change one's mind," but in New Testament usage that implies more than just a change in the way we think. It means also a change in how we respond to people and circumstances and a change in what we do. The Hebrew word behind the New Testament usage means "to turn around" and implies a change of direction.

Forgiveness, too, involves a change of mind and direction and this always involves some element of letting go. Calvin Miller tells a wonderful story about his son who liked to "save" things until they could no longer be saved. Miller says that one afternoon when they were having a family picnic near a stream his son took a milk carton and scooped up three tadpoles. He called them Peter, Paul, and Mary. (Any Peter, Paul and Mary fans here?) He took them home and kept them in a jar until the water turned green. Miller would ask him, "Tim, what are you doing with those tadpoles." And his son would say, "Dad, I'm saving them." Well, Peter died, then Paul. Mary was the lone survivor and actually achieved froghood. She grew legs and lost her tail, but she wasn't happy. Miller said to his son, "Tim, if you save Mary much longer, she's going to end up like Peter and Paul. You've got to let her go." He agreed. So they drove back to her ancestral home, walked down to the stream, opened up the jar, and as she hopped out they sang a few bars of "Born Free." (*Into the Depths of God*, 168.)

I suspect that some of us are "saving" grudges and resentments that are killing us.

Today, as we think about forgiveness and letting go of these things that wreck havoc in our families, church, community and world I want to focus more on the grace of forgiving than the grace of being forgiven. Of course, they are inseparable—two sides of the same coin. But according to Jesus' teachings, we can't really know the grace of being forgiven unless we experience the grace of forgiving.

The hope of the world, as well as our own spiritual, emotional, and physical health, depends on our capacity to let go of our pride and stubbornness; our need to be right; our need to control people, circumstances and outcomes. And perhaps the most important thing we need to let go of is our anger.

In one sense anger is simply a natural response to feeling threatened. Sometimes it may even serve a useful or necessary purpose in an emergency situation. But there are very few instances where the long term use of anger will be helpful, and no instance I can think of where it is necessary. Harboring anger leads to bitterness and resentment. According Dr. Fred Luskin in his book, *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*, when we harbor anger and fail to forgive we create grievance stories. Our grievance stories describe the painful things we have endured but not healed from. We know these stories because when we tell them it makes us mad or hurt all over again. Dr. Luskin says that we don't realize how many of our moods are determined by the random memories of past hurts. In addition, he says, we not only suffer emotionally, but our grievance stories activate stress chemicals, which pose risks for our physical well-being as well. (pp. 36-38)

In his book, *Hope Against Darkness*, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr shares a personal story of forgiveness that happened in his family near the time of his mother's death. He was sitting beside her bed, she was dying. He describes his mother as an earthy, farming woman, no sentimentalist. He was telling her that he was going to miss her and she said suddenly, "I want to hear it from him." He said, "What?" She said, "Him." He said, "You mean Daddy?" His father was 84 but the kids still called him Daddy. She said, "Yea, I want to hear if he's going to miss me." For weeks, says Rohr, Daddy had been telling her he loved her and was going to miss her.

He came over and told her again. She said, "I don't believe it." Father Rohr said, "Mother, you're a few hours from death. You can't say that." She persisted, "I don't believe it." Her husband asked her to forgive him for anything he ever done to hurt her. She was silent. Father Rohr had to play the role of priest. He said, "Mother, you're soon going to be before God. You don't want to come before God without forgiving everybody." She said, "I forgive everybody." He said, "But do you forgive Daddy?" She was silent again. His father jumped in, "Honey, I never fooled around with any other women." She says, "Well, I know that, I know that." They all knew that. But what they didn't know was what it was that she couldn't forgive.

Father Rohr says, "Mother, you know God, Our Father. You're only going to get as much forgiveness from God as you've given. Now, you've got to forgive Daddy." She kept her eyes closed. He pulled out every priestly and pastoral trick he knew. Nothing was getting through. Then he said, "Mother, I'm going to put one hand on your heart and I'm going to pray that it gets real soft." And as he prayed he started kissing the other hand. She said,

“That melts me. When you kiss my hand like that, now I’ve got to do it.” After a pause she said, “I’m a stubborn woman, all my life I’ve been a stubborn woman.” He said, “Well, mother we all knew that. Now, look at Daddy and tell him.” She looked over at him and said, “Rich, I forgive you.” Rohr prompted her, “Now mother the other half—ask Daddy’s forgiveness.” She struggled with this, but she summoned her energy and said, “Rich, I ask your forgiveness.”

Then she said, “That’s it, that’s it. That’s what I had to do.” She had been talking for days about “a mesh.” She would say, “There’s a mesh I’m trying to get through.” No one knew what she was talking about. Her son said to her, “Mother, do you think that was the mesh?” She said, “It’s gone. The mesh is gone.” And then she said, “God, I pray that I mean this forgiveness from my heart.” That was only four days before she died.

Then she said to her son, the priest: “Tell the girls (referring to his two sisters and his sister-in-law) to do this early and not to wait ‘til now. They’ll understand a woman’s heart and the way a man can hurt a woman.”

After fifty-four years of marriage, maybe there were little grudges or maybe some big ones, they didn’t know. Father Rohr conjectures that maybe it had something to do with space. She was the flower woman and her husband was the grass man and they were always fighting for more space. Sometimes he would run over her flowers with the lawn mower. Maybe that was a symbol of something much deeper in their souls. Who knows; they didn’t know. But whatever it was, she had finally let it go. He said to his mother, “Mother, aren’t you glad you said it.” She said, “I’m so happy, I’m so happy.”

Well, we have to let go of the grudges, the resentments, the grievances that have been retold again and again. Life is too short to hang on to these things.

In our Gospel text Mark says that the people who came out for baptism came confessing their sins. Confession, acknowledgement of wrong done or hurt caused is necessary in order to experience forgiveness. That does not mean, however, that my capacity to forgive is determined by someone else’s confession. I cannot control the response of someone else; I can only control my response.

It’s important not to confuse forgiveness with reconciliation. Jesus forgave his murderers on the cross, but obviously they were not reconciled. So regardless of the response or attitude of the offender, I need to forgive, not only because Jesus says so, but for my own personal peace. On the other hand, if I am the offender, then I cannot know the grace of forgiveness until I ask for it.

Let’s not be confused about what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing or condoning the pain or hurt or the severity of the offense caused

by another. If something terrible was done to us, forgiveness is not saying, "That wasn't so bad."

Forgiveness is not forgetting. I heard about this elderly couple sitting at home one evening. The husband says, "I'm craving some ice cream. I'm going to the Dairy Cheer. Want anything?" The wife says, "Yes I do. I want a Sunday with hot fudge, strawberry ice cream, whip cream, double nuts, no cherry." He says, "Okay" and starts to walk out the door. She says, "You better right it down. You will forget. I know your memory." He says, "My mind is like a steel trap. Got it all right here." He's gone for an hour. When he comes back he hands his wife a brown paper bag. Inside is a ham sandwich. She opens it up and says, "You forgot the mustard." Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Dr Luskin, in his book *Forgive for Good* says that we need to remember for three reasons. One, in order to ensure that something bad doesn't happen again. Two, we need to remember what happened so we can pat ourselves on the back for forgiving. He says we need to celebrate our capacity to forgive and remember our hurts from the point of view of healing, not from that of helpless victimization. Three, we need to remember so that we can offer compassion and support to others who are struggling with forgiveness. (p. 74)

In the biblical tradition when it says that God remembers our sin no more, it means that God does not hold a grudge, God does not keep a record to bring against us in order to condemn us.

Another thing that forgiveness is not; forgiveness is not the elimination of all consequences. Some wrongs require restitution. If a person under the influence of drugs or alcohol causes physical harm to another, forgiveness does not eliminate the need for restitution—for compensation and for justice. It's not enough to say, "I'm sorry." Restitution is required. Forgiveness does not eradicate all the consequences that come from a wrong done to someone. So forgiveness does not mean that there are no consequences.

The only thing that can possibly break the cycle of hate and violence and retaliation in our world is forgiveness. There can be no reconstruction, no reconciliation, no coming together of persons and nations without forgiveness. But forgiveness is a hard sell. It defies all reason and logic and standards of worthiness. As Richard Rohr says, "It is a melting into the mystery of God as unearned love, unmerited grace, the humility and powerlessness of a Divine Lover . . . Without forgiveness there will be no future. We have hurt one another in too many historically documented and remembered ways. The only way out of the present justified hatreds of the world is grace." (Hope, 146)

Forgiveness is the work of God. Author Madeleine L'Engle writes that forgiveness is ultimately a gift of grace rather than a simple act of the will. She says, "I have to be

willing to forgive with my mind, but forgiveness is finally a matter of the heart. And the forgiveness of the heart comes from God, not from me. My part is being willing to accept it.” (Glimpses of Grace, 210)

In our Gospel text John’s role is to prepare the way for the One who is coming after him. John baptizes with water. He proclaims the gift of forgiveness and calls people to conversion. But the one who is greater than John will baptize with the Holy Spirit. He imparts and mediates the gift of the Spirit, and with the Spirit comes the power and grace to give and receive forgiveness. Whenever and wherever forgiveness happens it’s always the work of God—whether the one who experiences it is a believer or not. It’s always grace; it’s always the work of God. And for Christians, for followers of Jesus, forgiveness is always the work of the risen Christ.

We are grateful, O God, that you are a God of grace, and that the gift of forgiveness is your gift, that it begins with you and constitutes what you are about in the world. We pray for the kind of peace in our world that only the grace of forgiveness can create. We pray, too, for personal peace, the emotional and spiritual healing that only forgiveness can bring. We pray for this so that we will no longer be victims of the past, so that we can be free of the resentment and bitterness that poisons our souls, so that we can no longer be chained to painful and hurtful memories that erode our present relationships and steal our joy. May we know the grace of forgiveness so that we can give more time and energy to loving and caring for our family and friends, and to serving others. May the One who baptizes with the Spirit baptize us today in the Spirit of grace and forgiveness so that we may live as your daughters and sons and help bring peace to our families, our communities, and to our world. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.