

Forgiveness Is ... Necessary

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
March 10, 2019 – 1st Sunday of Lent
Text: Matthew 6:12-15

Forgiveness is a conundrum, a puzzle, something which seems simple and straightforward when it is really nothing of the kind. Generally, we tend to think of forgiveness as something that happens when someone is wronged by someone else who then chooses to let it go or move beyond it or acknowledges it as being “no big deal” or something similar. That understanding is not wrong as far as it goes. It just does not go anywhere near far enough in explaining the complexities of forgiveness which are directly connected to how we look at wrong-doing or sin, as we Christians would call it. You simply cannot have forgiveness if you do not have the offense, whatever it is, which precipitates the need for forgiveness. So, forgiveness automatically assumes two parties – the one wronged and the one doing the wrong. That, at least, is simple. Or is it? This obscure complexity is precisely why I thought taking the five Sundays of Lent to ponder forgiveness more intentionally, more deeply, would be an excellent task for this season of the church year when reflection on our sins is supposed to be front and center in our minds and hearts.

As is so often the case when tackling a complex topic such as forgiveness, it is always works best to begin with the basics. So, I

decided to look up the definition of forgiveness in both my old theological dictionary and in my trusty old Webster's. Imagine my surprise when "forgiveness" was not addressed in my Christian theological dictionary. Two definitions of "sin" were offered but no definition of forgiveness. Hmmm... I moved on to my Webster's and there, at least, was a definition of forgiveness: "the act of forgiving: pardon." Not especially enlightening. The definition of the verb "forgive" was a little more helpful offering three different meanings: "1) to cease to feel resentment against an offender; 2a) to give up resentment of or claim of requital for; and 2b) to grant relief from payment of," as in a debt. Okay, a little clearer. Maybe.

Thus, Webster's seems to see forgiveness as requiring that someone who has been wronged in some way chooses – agrees – decides – I'm not sure which is the right word – to let go of hurt feelings and resentment brought about by said wrong. I'm not at all sure that definition captures God's notion of forgiveness. Webster's definition of forgiveness, while technically correct as far as it goes, seems to me to let the person who commits the offense requiring forgiveness off the hook pretty much entirely. It doesn't even address the need for that offender to ask for forgiveness, to admit something wrong, inappropriate, hurtful was done in the first place. It puts all the responsibility for the entire circumstance on the one doing the forgiving rather than holding

the one needing forgiveness accountable at all. That will never do, at least not for God.

The text we read this morning from Matthew is, of course, the well-known passage in which Jesus introduces the disciples to what we know as the Lord's Prayer. We only read a small snippet of the prayer, specifically the verses which have to do with forgiveness: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Jesus then goes on to provide a further clarification of only this petition in the prayer when he says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." So, it is clear from this foundational text of the Christian faith that forgiveness is indeed necessary. And, that it is always a two-way street. It acknowledges that we all at times need forgiveness for our offenses and also that at times we will be the ones needing to offer forgiveness to someone else who has committed an offense, a sin, against us.

But, it's even more than that, according to theologian and biblical scholar William Barclay. He states that this petition about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer is the most frightening (his actual word) of all the petitions contained in that beloved prayer. (Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1*, 1975) It is the most frightening, he argues, because it calls for proportionality. We are forgiven by God for our sins only as much as we are willing to and

actually do forgive others. In other words, if we hold on to feelings of resentment and ill will, nursing a grudge against someone else for a perceived wrong, God will respond in kind to us for all that we do wrong in God's eyes. Yikes! That IS a frightening thought!

An interesting sidebar conversation related to this has to do with the various words which are, grammatically speaking, the object of the verb "forgive" in the many different versions of this Prayer whenever it appears in print, in the Bible and elsewhere. Specifically, what exactly are we asking God to forgive – our debts, our trespasses, our offenses, our sins? All of these words have appeared in different versions of the Lord's Prayer over the centuries. Scholars point out that the oldest Latin translations of New Testament use the word most often translated as "debts" but the use of the word "trespasses" also dates back to ancient times being used regularly beginning in the 3rd century. So, which is it? Who knows? Does it matter? Yes, many scholars would argue that it matters a lot. In the early days of the Liberation Theology movement of the 1970's, the argument was made that powerful, shadowy forces pushed for the change away from debts to trespasses because there was a concern in the corporate world that poor folks might take the prayer literally, expecting forgiveness of monetary debts that were preventing entire countries, especially in South America, from being able to feed

their people. Literally a push for forgiveness of debt was seen as dangerous if it meant people connected it to the food needed to survive that was in such short supply. My goodness, now doesn't that sound political??? We'll come back to that another time...

For our purposes today, what it all comes down to is that how you understand forgiveness has everything to do with how you understand sin. In other words, you cannot understand what forgiveness is or how to engage in it if you do not first understand what causes the need for forgiveness. Once again, the scholar William Barclay offers helpful insight for us. He notes that there are actually five different Greek words used for sin in the Christian Scriptures we know as the New Testament. They are:

- 1) *Hamartia* which literally means “missing the target.” It is the failure to be what you could have been, what God intended you to be;
- 2) *Parabasis* which means “stepping across.” This refers to stepping across intentionally the line between right and wrong, good and evil.
- 3) *Paraptoma* which means “slipping across.” This refers to unintentionally crossing the line between right and wrong.
- 4) *Anomia* which means “lawlessness.” This refers to a person who clearly knows what is right but decides to do the wrong anyway.
- 5) *Opheilema* which means “debt.” This refers to sin as a failure to pay what is due; it is a failure of duty to God and to your fellow humans. (Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 1975)

Now that we're all really confused and overwhelmed, let's

stop for a moment and recap where we are. Forgiveness is a word we all know yet it is so much more complicated than we take the time to consider. Forgiveness requires two parties – the one wronged and the one doing the wrong. Forgiveness is directly connected to how we define the idea of wrong and being wronged or, as we Christians think of it, how we define sin. And, there are many ways to define sin. It can be anything from failing to be what you are capable of being in a given situation to accidentally wronging someone, to intentionally wronging someone, to knowing what's right but doing the wrong thing anyway, to failing to pay what is due to someone else, failing in your duty to another.

Better, but, this is still not enough to understand fully why forgiveness is necessary to each of us all the time. Forgiveness is necessary because of what it means to our souls, to the very core of our beings. Let me explain. I've recently become addicted to a wonderful television series on Amazon Prime called *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. It's a complicated plotline which is hysterically funny on many levels, all the time. Set in the late 1950's it is the story of how a young Jewish housewife from the Upper West Side of New York City decides to pursue a career as a stand-up comedienne. She hits many a bump in the road the biggest one being that her husband, himself an amateur comic, sees her act one night and promptly leaves her since he is the source of much of her humor. She is left to construct a new life

with their two children, moving back in with her parents and finding a day job with a major department store while still pursuing her comedic dreams at night. She gradually becomes more and more successful, experiencing many misadventures along the way, but her husband becomes more and more miserable. He still loves her and regrets his decision to leave, but he cannot bring himself to support her dreams so they remain separated. He ends up quitting his own job and going to work for his father in the garment business, where he makes his dad's marginal business into a hugely successful one. But he's still miserable, focusing on what might have been, what could have been. He actually lives at the factory in an apartment he creates at the office because he can't bear anything else. One day he decides to throw a big party for all the workers in the company to celebrate that he was finally able to buy the building that housed the factory. He has way too much champagne so his best friend stays behind, sending everyone else away so he can put Joel to bed. As Joel lays in bed, he looks at his best friend and says, "All I want is forgiveness. Why can't I have forgiveness? I just need forgiveness. Forgiveness, that's it."

Forgiveness, that's it. And it is, for all of us. We all do dumb things. We all do unkind things. We all make mistakes, intentional and unintentional. We all fall short of what we could be from time to time. We all fail to do what we should do

sometimes. We all sin. It's just the human condition. And it is that humanness – our humanness – which makes forgiveness necessary. We can't help needing it, all the time in big ways and small. In other words, it is in our nature NOT to be perfect. Goofing up is who we are. And Jesus reminds us in these beautiful words that somehow, that's okay. We can still be forgiven no matter what we have done, or not done. We can still be forgiven whether we meant to do something mean or it just happened. We can still be forgiven IF ... we admit we need it and IF we are willing to forgive others who have wronged us.

Dear friends, forgiveness is the balm for our weary, broken hearts and our scarred souls. Forgiveness is God's love made real in us each and every day when we are smart enough to recognize we need it, brave enough to ask for it and strong enough to offer it to someone else who needs it from us. Forgiveness is necessary. It's also personal. But that's a sermon for another time – next week to be precise... Amen.