

Forgiveness Is ... Personal

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
March 17, 2019 – 2nd Sunday of Lent
Text: Luke 6:27-38

For most of us forgiveness tends to be an intellectual exercise. We like to think of it as a spiritual exercise, maybe even a theological one if we are so inclined. But that's not really how we think about it most of the time. Usually we approach forgiveness as something we can think our way through. We reason with ourselves about why someone who has wronged us should be forgiven, or perhaps why we are justified in not forgiving them. We might even try convince ourselves that we can forgive someone for a wrong, as long as we don't forget. This is the worst because it lets us hold on to the wrong, savoring how good we are for forgiving it even as we recall whatever it was in excruciating detail. That, dear friends, is not forgiveness.

We tend to get mired in the technical sense of forgiveness equating saying the words of forgiveness to someone while in our heart of hearts the wound is still deep and fresh. That's why this is not real forgiveness. It can't be as long as the pain of the wrong remains vividly clear and powerful in our hearts. Without real forgiveness offered, we can never look at the person the same way again, no matter how hard they may try to make amends. This is not what forgiveness means. This is not how it feels. You simply

cannot hold on to a grudge and forgive it at the same time. It's just not possible. It's not possible because forgiveness – actually the need for it when we have been wronged by someone – is always a deeply personal thing.

This is especially true for some folks when we think about forgiveness theologically. After all, a key tenet of Christianity is that we have all sinned and therefore are in need of forgiveness, not only from the one we have wronged but, even more importantly, from God. This can be a difficult concept to wrestle with if we consider ourselves to be a good person, a faithful Christian, a loving person. Early on in my ministerial career I was attending the Church Council meeting of the very large church where I was serving on staff. It was one of my first meetings so I had no idea what to expect. But I had never anticipated the conversation I witnessed that evening. No less a person than the Moderator of the church said that he did not agree with there being a prayer of confession in the order of worship on Communion Sundays. He said he knew he was a good person and he knew everybody else in the congregation was a good person too so they had absolutely nothing to confess. The room was absolutely dead silent for a good 60 seconds, which is saying something because the Church Council at this church numbered in excess of 30 people routinely.

I could not imagine what the Senior Pastor could possibly say in response to such an outlandish statement from such a powerful person in the congregation. And that's the thing. He didn't say anything. He started to chuckle and then he started to laugh and then he said, "Come on, now, Lew! Aren't you the one who always wants to be out of these meetings in an hour? That's a 2 hour conversation, minimum!" Everyone breathed again as the situation was diffused. Lew indeed agreed that he did want to get out of the meeting on time so he agreed to let the matter close. And we kept the prayers of confession on Communion Sunday.

I talked with the pastor the next day about the whole conversation since I was still in shock that someone who had been a lifelong member in the church could think they had no need to ask God for forgiveness. To me it sounded like this person thought he was perfect! "No, not all," the pastor said to me. "Lew only thinks of sin as big stuff – like criminal behavior of some sort – and since he's not a criminal, he doesn't need forgiveness. Lew is one of the most ethical people I know. He works hard at being a good person, a good Christian, a family man. He needs to believe that's enough for God. The daily decisions we all make that let us slide into sin are just not something he thinks about."

"But what about God? What will God think of Lew?" I asked in all my 30-something sincerity. The pastor answered, "God knows Lew is a good man with a good heart. God also knows the

way Lew thinks and the way he looks at the world. God loves Lew just as he is, unacknowledged sin and all. That's forgiveness. That's grace."

Today's passage from Luke is just such a conversation about forgiveness Jesus had with the disciples. "Love your enemies," he says, and I am sure they looked at him like he had three heads. But he didn't stop there! "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you," But how can we do that, the disciples had to have asked. "Do to others what you would have them do to you," Jesus answers. Let's remember that at this point in history, this was a brand new concept. This whole idea of love as a response to hatred was something none of the disciples had ever heard of. Sure, they knew from the teachings of the Torah that they were to care for the widows and orphans, those living at the margins, as an act of righteousness. But, being kind to someone who was intentionally mean to you? Blessing abusers? How was that even possible?

The key to understanding what Jesus is saying here is to realize that for Jesus, saying "love your enemies" is not a statement or a slogan or a sound bite. It is, in reality, a strategy for how one is to live life as a person beloved of God. Loving your enemies is how the spread of evil is contained. Loving your enemies takes the notion of how one responds to mean words and behaviors to a whole different place. You don't just speak words

of love. You don't just offer forgiveness. You act with love, even to the people who have wronged you the most.

And don't think that Jesus' encouragement "to do to others as you would have them do to you" is just a sappy sentimentalization because it's not. It's really a very humbling thought. This is a real challenge! After all, who is your biggest critic, the one to find fault with you the fastest and the harshest? I'm thinking most of us would say ourselves. We are always constantly second-guessing ourselves. To a point that can be a good thing, but all too often we just beat up on ourselves. For Jesus to say "do to others what you would have them do to you" he's really urging you to forgive yourself before even attempting to forgive someone else.

You will remember, I hope, our good friend William Barclay who in last week's sermon revealed for us the five ways we sin that require forgiveness: *Hamartia* – the failure to be what God intended you to be; *Parabasis* – Intentionally stepping across the line between good and evil; *Paraptoma* – Unintentionally stepping across the line between right and wrong; *Anomia* – Complete disregard for what is right and wrong; and, *Opheilema* – a failure in your duty to God and other people. We had quite the conversation about these different kinds of sin at Sanctuary this past Wednesday! As we talked, it became clearer that when we talk about sin, whether intentional or unintentional, it's always personal. We do not act wrongly in the abstract. Our words said

in anger to another, that's personal. Whether it was *paraptoma*, unintentional, or *parabasis*, deliberate intended to hurt the other, it doesn't matter. What makes the sin, the wrong action or the wrong words spoken, so painful to the other, and perhaps even ourselves, is that it is so personal. We can see the hurt in the other's eyes. Or, even if we can't see the person, as is the case with social media conversations much of the time, we still know when our words hurt. And we know when others are trying deliberately to hurt us. That's why they're called internet trolls!!!

This week our friend Barclay, invites us to consider the different kinds of love that are referenced in the Bible, specifically the New Testament. Again, the ancient Greek makes the distinctions easier to follow since there are different words for the different kinds of love: *Eros* refers to romantic love; *Storge* refers to familial love; *Philia* refers to the love a friend has for a friend; and then there's agape. *Agape* is unique. It is the unending, unconditional love of God for God's beloved – that's us. Barclay argues that in order to understand what loving our enemies really requires of us, we most first know what kind of love we're talking about. He believes that *agape* – the unconditional, unending love of God – is what Jesus is referring to when he tells the disciples, and us, that we are to love our enemies. Only a love like God's can possibly reach beyond hate to transform an enemy into someone lovable.

This makes sense, too, when we look at the example Jesus follows this statement up with. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” he says. Big deal. You love the people who are loveable. Anyone can do that. “If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?” Again, big deal. It’s easy to do good to someone who does the same for you. Anyone can do that. The hard part comes in loving those who are unlovable precisely because of how they have treated you. The hard part comes in being kind to someone who has been mean to you. That requires the agape love which transcends all the other kinds of love. And it is only that kind of all encompassing, unending God love that makes forgiveness truly possible.

Make no mistake, this is hard to do! Sometimes it seems downright impossible to do! But, Jesus says, look at what’s at stake – your own soul. Your own well-being. Your own life lived day to day. This kind of radical love, radical forgiveness is impossibly difficult precisely because it is so very personal. It hits us where we live and breathe and have our being. Literally! “Do not judge and you will not be judged,” Jesus says. “Do not condemn and you will not be condemned,” he promises. “Forgive and you will be forgiven.” Then he ends with the most wonderful image – one of my favorites in all the Bible. “Give and it will be given to you,” he says. And no measly, sparing gift will you receive back for your gift. “A good measure, pressed down,

shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap!” Imagine that! Imagine your favorite food being poured into a big container just for you, and the person doing the pouring wants to make sure you get every last bite! So the food is pressed down, crammed into the container. Then the pourer shakes it again, creating just a smidge more room for more to be added. And then a little more even then so this yummy lusciousness just for you is literally pouring over the edges of the container, running down your fingers. Imagine!! That’s God’s love for you. That’s God willingness to forgive you, no matter what. That’s God saying to you, “yes, you messed up. You know it. I know it. And I forgive you anyway. I love you anyway.”

Yes, forgiveness, like love is personal. Very, very personal. Whether we are the one forgiving or the one in need of forgiveness, it’s all personal. That’s why it’s so very important. It matters because, as Jesus said, “the measure you give – of love, of forgiveness, of joy, of kindness – is the measure you get back.” Full and overflowing or skimpy and filled with something yucky. The choice is yours. Personally. Amen.