

“Forgiveness”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 2/3/19

John 20:21-23 – *Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

Earlier this week Brad Adams and I were carefully rummaging through the stacks of some of Bev Cosby’s old sermons. We picked out a couple and copied them for deeper study, and among them, unbeknownst to Brad, I found a treasure that I surreptitiously placed over to the side for my later personal reading pleasure. The title caught my eye, “The Capacity to Forgive,” April 23, 1967. Certainly one of the hardest topics to tackle, but as most of us would probably agree that it is one of the most needed attributes in our relationships with others. Bev seems to hold nothing back in the sermon itself. From its beginning, he challenges our small community of faith. He says, *“Not to be forgiven, nor to be forgiving in our relationships is to cancel out our witness, and a denial of our faith. As Christ has forgiven us, so also we must forgive.”* In essence, Bev infers that at the moment we cease to forgive others, we cease to be called followers of Christ. My immediate reaction to reading his introduction, was simply, “Ouch!”

He then continued in his sermon to talk about the time when Peter asked Jesus, “How many times am I to forgive my brother when he constantly sins against me? Seven times?” And then Jesus responds, “No, but seventy times seven,” which Bev interpreted correctly as the equivalent of Jesus saying, “Not seven times, but a million times” –meaning there is no end to forgiveness. But you and I know there is an end. There is a moment of “enough is enough.” Right? We know there is an expiration date on our love, isn’t that more accurate to how really feel?

Bev then exposed the crux of the problem: *personal hurt*. Our co-founder didn’t seem to beat around the bush on this one, he straight for the jugular. Highlighting the line from the Lord’s prayer that we pray regularly “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” He said, *“Forgiveness is the dimension of Christian agape, love, which comes into play when we hurt; that is, personally hurt. Someone has injured us intentionally or unintentionally. Someone has set up a conflict within us by our trespassing against us. Some value or standard which we have has been abused. Someone has disregarded or trampled on something we hold as important and good. Someone has flouted our sense of right and wrong. However we may have offended we know we have been trespassed against, and something which is very dear to us is being destroyed—maybe even our very being, our personhood. This is the situation in which forgiveness applies. Other aspects of the Christian love apply in other situations and in other kinds of relationships, but forgiveness is operative when we’re hurt. It’s important to know this because it is when we are hurt that we are least able to forgive, least prone to want to forgive, and yet is the only time we time we need to.”* He’s absolutely right. We seem to feature forgiveness as a prominent Christian attribute when we really don’t need it, and conveniently forget about it when it is truly necessary to move forward.

Our second pastor David Edwards in a 2014 sermon, encouraged our church to chart its path in the way of forgiveness, placing the onus squarely back on us, He says (9/14/14): *“Our community is here for*

persons who desire to take responsibility for their own lives of faith, to live their lives as a journey in God and in service to the world, and to do so in community. We are not here to tell one another what to do, what to think, what to believe, but to be a community of God's love in which each person can take that ultimate responsibility for her or his own life. What God has called each of us to be and do with the gifts God has given us is what ultimately matters. Undertaking that journey within a community of God's love is, I think, both the greatest challenge and the greatest blessing of our lives. It means that we will continue to learn what it means to love through forgiveness and non-judgment, and in many other ways. It means coming home to our true selves." David keenly saw the responsibility as ours alone, one which we must not abscond or place on another; instead he says we are to take it squarely upon ourselves to remedy with love and forgiveness.

In Thomas Keating's book "Invitation to Love," the Trappist monk says *"Happy are the merciful, mercy will be shown to them' is the beatitude that corresponds to the full reflective self-consciousness of mental egoic consciousnesses. At this level we become fully human. Our response to life is cooperative, nonjudgemental, and accepting of others. This beatitude fulfills Christ's new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). The new commandment is much more demanding than the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. To love one's neighbor as oneself is to respect the image of God in our neighbor with all the rights which that dignity confers. To love one another as Jesus loves us is to love one another in our humanness—in our individuality and opinionatedness, in personality conflicts and in unbearable situations. It is to continue to show love, no matter what the provocation may be to act otherwise. The merciful are those whose concern is beginning to expand beyond family and loved ones into the larger community. Their concern ultimately includes the whole human family, past, present, and to come."* It is clear that if we love God, we love each other, from A-Z, past, present, and future. We take each other in, even with our faults and ugliness.

After the resurrection, we have a story in the Gospel of John where Jesus empowers his followers with the Holy Spirit. It's as if he knew they couldn't resolve to do it on their own. They needed something more, something outside of who they were, a drop of the Divine—something that could transcend their hurt, their pettiness. And so Jesus did it. He obliged them with a single blow of his breath, gifting unto them the Divine Spirit itself. The scripture says Jesus breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." It's as if the true ministry of his followers boiled down to a simple moment of true self-empowerment: *The power to forgive*. Though it says "if you don't give them, they are not forgiven," we must not fixate on that part too much as we know from everything else in Jesus' teachings, that there "actually" is no other option but to forgive: *"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," "forgive so that you too shall be forgiven," "blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy," "no, forgive him seventy times seven," "father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* Forgiveness defines Jesus' entire life and teaching on this earth. Therefore it is silly to think that we as his followers are not equally compelled to do the same. And so we must. It is an essential part of our journey, both inward and outward.

I invite each of you to join me in closing our eyes. And take a few moments to think of those who have hurt you most. Let their images appear in your mind. Their faces clearly seen. Those who have personally hurt you, whether intentionally or not.

Now the next part is the hardest. Maybe you must wait to feel Jesus' blowing of the Holy Spirit in order to muster the strength to join with me in saying three simple words: I forgive you. However you arrive to such courageousness, I pray you find the strength now in this moment, and repeat with me three times in succession those three words: I forgive you (pause) I forgive you (pause) I forgive you.

For you also are likewise forgiven.

Shalom