

“When Forgiveness is the Measure You Give” © 2019 Ellen Clark Clémot

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Date: February 24, 2019 – Seventh Sunday in Epiphany

Text: Luke 6:27-38

- Theme: We are called to forgive others, as God first forgave us, and also to forgive ourselves – but none of this means that we must accept harm done to us or tolerate crimes of abuse.
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Merciful God, illumine your Word to us this morning, and remind us of your abundant grace. Teach us to be merciful to others and to ourselves – but help us find the strength to stand up against wrongdoing, and to find help when insult becomes injury. Help us remember that we are not called to be Jesus, but only to follow him. And that you, O Lord, are the source of all graciousness. We trust in you to find our peace.

Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

One morning as I was listening to a call-in radio show over my morning coffee, I heard the radio host introduce the topic of forgiveness. He quickly had my full attention. Listeners were invited to call in with their personal stories of forgiving someone. On a grainy voicemail recording, a woman caller had dialed in her forgiveness story to share on the air. “I forgave my husband,” she said, “for a terrible omission. He refused to dance with me at our own wedding because he was not comfortable doing it.” Then she added, “We have been together for 14 years.”

I liked the woman’s candor – and her forgiveness story. For one thing, her public radio announcement of her forgiveness, and naming her husband’s wrongdoing - perhaps nothing worse than a bad case of bashfulness, seems to have succeeded in helping her to vent those 14 years of negative emotions once and for all. She emotionally transferred her big wedding day disappointment to all of us listeners. Her husband remains anonymous, but the rest of us, at least those of us who like to dance, all shared some heartache for her lost “moment of a lifetime.” We might agree her husband could have shown more chivalry to his betrothed at their wedding party. But it’s done now, and the past is past.

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For most of us, when someone has done us wrong, or hurt our feelings, or said something unkind, or untrue about us behind our backs, forgiveness is not our first instinctual response. More typically we are hurt by the unkind words or action, sometimes feeling deeply wounded. From there we go to anger. We can no longer talk about the person or the occurrence without feeling some strong negative emotions. We’re so angry. So hurt. So mad.

And yet Jesus says – “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.” That’s a tall order when we’re feeling indignant. “Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you.” It makes absolutely no sense, unless you were paying attention to the first part of Jesus’s sermon. Remember this is “part two” of the Sermon on the Plain – the teaching that started off with a list of blessings and woes. And significantly, Luke tells us that Jesus is preaching to his disciples here, to those who “listen,” not merely the twelve “apostles” he chose on the mountaintop, but all the other followers, the crowds of them, whom he met on the level plain

when he came down from the mountain the next morning. A crowd that would have been a lot like us, shaky in their faith sometimes, but so desperate for direction.

It was in the beginning of the sermon, during the blessings and woes, that we first heard the paradox of discipleship – that the poor are blessed, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. But woe to the rich and the happy and the popular, for they will not be on top of the heap in God’s Kingdom - where all are made equal and all are treasured, fed, and contented.

The poor fishermen, outcast, friendless disciples are probably feeling fine, at this point, because Jesus tells them they are among the blessed. So, when he starts in where we pick up this morning with instructions to love our enemies, pray for our abusers and do unto others as we would have them do to us, the situation is not as pointless as it seems. It’s still a tall order, but it’s coming from a good place. Jesus has promised them God’s abundance - the treasure of the Kingdom, a banquet meal if their hungry, great joy if they’ve been weeping – because that is what is in store for all people in the Kingdom of God – abundant goodness for all. Why not share it? Forgive one another. There’s grace upon grace in the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom is yours – endless, abundant love, more than enough.

And the task of the disciple is to build God’s Kingdom up “on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus tells us. And it all starts with the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do to you.

It should cost us nothing to share the graciousness of God with those who have showered us with insults. After all, gracious forgiveness, and the outstretched hand of peace between two who have fallen into enmity, can bring a new and hopeful future, one that is better for everyone involved, better and bigger than any one person could achieve on his or her own.

Forgiveness permits peace and human flourishing on an exponential scale. Just read the rest of the Joseph story and the reunion of his family that led to the salvation of Israel. Or the story of the forgiven Peter, or the forgiven Paul, or the entire forgiven nation of South Africa through the extraordinary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee brought together by Bishop Tutu in our own era.

We *can* forgive our enemies, with God’s help, if we are well – really and truly strong in our sense of having more than enough love to share. Because it takes an enormous amount of graciousness and self-possession, and Christian faith, to forgive one’s enemies, let alone love them.

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I could stop here.

As a responsible preacher, I can take you, theologically speaking, from the “blessing and woes” to the abundance of God’s love as fuel for our own forgiveness of others.

But it would not be enough, for the message from the Sermon on the Plain quickly gets murky for our modern day. Because Jesus muddies the water for us when he recommends we turn the other cheek when someone strikes us in the face, or when someone steals from us, we should say nothing. This is where we need to hit “pause” and reflect. Because there is a difference between changing our attitudes about others and putting our lives in danger. Without raising the nuances of human dignity and self-respect, this biblical text that leads to the Golden Rule, can be misinterpreted and used as grounds for abuse. So, let’s reflect for a moment and consider what we need to know about forgiveness between humans as opposed to what we need to know about forgiveness from God.

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Let's start with Charles Griswold, a philosophy professor at Boston University, and a prominent writer on the subject of forgiveness, apology, pardon, and reconciliation. He sees forgiveness as a moral act. Griswold argues that forgiveness is a virtue that a good person would seek out because it expresses fundamental moral ideas, including spiritual growth and renewal; truth-telling; mutually respectful address; responsibility; reconciliation and peace.¹ These are all good things.

In order for someone to forgive from the heart, as Jesus would have us do, Griswold maintains that we must be able to take two steps:

- 1) Give up on the idea of ever seeking revenge; and
- 2) Release the toxic anger that accompanies the hurt we've suffered.

Other times, he suggests, it is not forgiveness that is needed so much as a "pardon" – a free pass, a unilateral gift of grace. Arguably, Christ's words on the cross – "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" – are words of pleading for a pardon, not forgiveness.

A pardon does not require contrition by the wrongdoer or even knowledge of the wrong. To pardon one who does wrong is a truly gracious act – an unmerited act – and describes well God's gracious gift to us. We have been pardoned by God through the saving act of Jesus Christ – his death and resurrection. Christ's redemption of us is not merited, it is a free gift.

When we consider the etymology of the word "pardon," and its French roots, *par don*, meaning "by gift," we can hear an echo of the gracious gift that forgiveness is, even in our own language: "for – give." And being "for given" is the state of receiving mercy. Thus, that which was "given before," which allows us to move forward with our lives free of guilt and remorse, is God's mercy through Jesus Christ. *Before* all things, God *gave* us mercy. And for mercy, we give our *thanks* to God, or, as the French would say, "*merci*."²

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I don't know about you, but I give out far more apologies than I get – and more often than not I find myself apologizing to my wrong-doer for wrongs he or she has done to me! How about you? When someone jostles you on the train or in a packed grocery store, are you the one, and the only one, who says "Sorry"?

Maybe it's the world we live in today, a world of self-justification and self-righteousness, and downright selfishness, that makes authentic apology from others, and peaceful co-existence among world neighbors, seem like a thing of the past.

In such a world where we feel we have been both wronged and disregarded, forgiveness can be extraordinarily hard to do. But perhaps the challenge of forgiveness can be tempered a bit when we clarify *what forgiveness is and what it is not*.

First, forgiveness is not a free-pass to the wrong-doer to keep on sinning. We can forgive an individual sinner, but we are not asked to accept the sin. At no point does Jesus ask us to condone wrong-doing. Stealing is still wrong. Effective forgiveness requires us to confront the wrong-doer, name the wrong against us, and demand that it stop. Then we can forgive. Yet it is hard for us to do that somehow. Sometimes it's even dangerous to do. That's when we need alternative strategies, life-preserving strategies, to follow instead.

¹ Excerpted from "On Forgiveness," by Charles L. Griswold, published in *The New York Times*, December 25, 2010.

² This word study, and word play, is inspired by the work of semiotician and philosopher, Jacques Derrida.

Second, forgiveness is not an acceptance of victimization. We are not called to bear the cross of domestic abuse. Jesus did not mean to condone violence by saying “turn the other cheek.” Women, especially, are not expected to keep silent and absorb the violence, neither physical nor mental, that is dished out to them by violent men – be they abusive husbands, boyfriends, famous football players, or an R&B singer. Christian teaching has come a long way on this topic in recent years, but statistics continue to show that we, women, still are suffering in silence at the hands of abusive men. We were not created to suffer. Instead, we need to get to safety. We need to get away. Forgiveness is for a later time, if ever, if your life, or your sanity, is in danger.

Third, forgiveness does not mean trivializing abusive behavior or the injury it causes. There are violent crimes and abusive relationships. Our suffering is real, especially the mental anguish we face in trying to make sense of life under the same roof with an active alcoholic or drug-addict and that person is also someone we love, or once loved and now barely recognize. The first priority is getting healthy and ending the cycle of enabling behaviors. Forgiveness, in these cases, may be a long time coming.

That is why it is important to remember the context of Christ’s message in Luke’s gospel this morning. Christ was encouraging forgiveness as the guiding principle for life together as Christians, *not life in an abusive household*. Christ was teaching his disciples about the abundance of God’s mercy and encouraging them to practice it where they could. But remember the twelve were all men. Women, if someone strikes you, get to safety, then call the police.

Forgiveness is not a call to suffering and victimization at the hands of another. It is never that. We are too precious to God to allow ourselves to be destroyed by someone else. We are never called to forgive an abuser only to be abused again and again and again.

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It matters – what forgiveness is and what it is not. We have been forgiven, by God, a great debt. And if we are safe, and strong, and well, we can turn to our neighbors and forgive them just as we have been forgiven. For most of us, the wrongs we suffer are no worse than the wrongs we have doled out ourselves. Forgiveness is something Christians should strive to do. And, even when emotionally difficult, “[s]ometimes you can forgive the impossible when you remember that you have been impossibly forgiven more times than you can count.”³

There is one more thing about forgiveness to remember. When the day comes that you have done wrong and you have confessed and apologized and made amends; when you have suffered and escaped and healed; when forgiveness is in order and forgiveness is given; or even when there is no forgiveness given but you have been assured of God’s pardon: Remember to save some forgiveness for yourself.

We all make mistakes. Accept your humanity. Let go of the self-loathing, the regret, and the self-blame. Take a deep breath – and forgive *yourself*. Be generous – with you.

For God has forgiven you already – and has given you grace in good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over – for the measure you give will be a mere hint of the mercy God lovingly gives you back.

Amen.

³ Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life – A Geography of God* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 102.