

The Gift of Forgiveness

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Old Testament: Genesis 45: 1-15

Joseph forgives his brothers

New Testament: Luke 23: 32-34

Jesus on the Cross

It was during Lent that I received in my email an apology from a colleague and asking forgiveness for something that happened in a church we were serving 13 years ago! That surprising request led me to a deep reflection on what it means both to be forgiven and to offer forgiveness to one who has harmed you.

I want to clearly state in our time together today that forgiveness is NEVER about saying that what happened was okay. It is about letting go of anger and bitterness as we let the love of Jesus into our hearts. It is a gift we can give to ourselves - not to someone else. Also, in our time together today, I'm not coupling "forgetting" together with "forgiveness". Sometimes one leads to the other, but not always. I've shared with JAVA members - those who have lost a loved one to murder, that forgiveness is not forgetting what happened. In January 2020, Stacey, the mother of a 22 year old who was murdered in December 2016, was shocked at the sentencing hearing by her son's killers apology to her. She is one of the founding members of JAVA and said after the hearing "We're going to have to work on forgiveness". She has helped me grow so much in my "Forgiveness 101" understanding - so has Amy Davis, part of our congregation whose nephew was murdered and Jaime McMillen whose young cousin was killed at age 17 and the accused murderer was caught almost 18 years later and is awaiting a late spring trial here in Ft. Wayne.

Forgiveness is liberating to the forgiver and the offender. For the forgiver, the suffocation of anger lifts the liberation of letting go is physically, mentally and emotionally healthy.

Let's look first at our Old Testament scripture in Genesis. Joseph tells his brothers who he really is; the same brothers who sold him into slavery and then lied to their father Jacob that Joseph was dead. What would most people do in a situation like that? Take revenge? Make the brother's lives miserable? Joseph didn't. Joseph told them he forgave them. Even though what they did was wrong, he said, God used their actions to provide a safe place for their families during the 7 year drought. Joseph sent them back to Jacob to bring everything they owned back to Egypt so that a remnant of God's chosen people could survive. Joseph looked at the high points and low points of his life and saw God was with him through it all. Because of that understanding, he was able to forgive his brothers.

From the example of Joseph, who forgave his brothers for their jealousy and envy, we can see that forgiveness can begin healing not only for us, but the family that is suffering some sort of separation. If forgiveness by a person can be so healing we know that God will forgive much, much more and more grievous sins.

A book that has helped me with my own forgiveness challenges is: Katherine Schwarzenegger Pratt (mother of journalist Maria Shriver) "The Gift of Forgiveness: Inspiring stories from Those who Have Overcome the Unforgivable" (Pamela Dorman Books Life) she conducted more than 20 in depth interviews with people who've let go of resentment under unfathomable circumstances. Included in her book:

Chris Williams who forgave the drunken teen who smashed into his car, killing his pregnant wife and 2 of their children. Williams realized that withholding forgiveness and seeking revenge would lock him into a never-ending cycle of anger. Forgiveness offered him the "ability to regain control when you experience something that seems to take every choice away from you".

However, as the author notes, forgiveness is also complicated. Should we forgive those who not only don't ask for it, fail to display any remorse, snap back at any notice of their wrong doing or are dead?

The author says YES! (Ouch! - this is hard for me to process).

Elizabeth Smart was abducted in 2002 at age 14. Her case made national news. Smart says forgiving her captors enabled her to move on with her life. "Forgiveness is not necessarily a two way street," Smart says, "nor is it necessarily the banishing of anger." It's allowing myself to feel whatever emotions I feel and to deal with them."

In Smart's telling, forgiving also has a practical benefit. "Holding on to a traumatic past does nothing but consume our present emotional space."

Forgiveness, is more than a single decision.

Sue Klebold, whose son was 1 of 2 shooters who killed 12 students and 1 teacher at Columbine High School in 1999, says she always will wonder whether she could have done more had she been aware of her son's emotional unraveling. She says she never will fully forgive herself but has come to an understanding; she has to let go of her anger and cultivated empathy.

A good pastor friend Jim would connect with that. Running late for a church meeting, he turned the wrong way on a one way street and hit an 8 year old, crossing the street. The child survived, But Jim says his screams of pain from the broken leg haunted him in the night as he worried about something similar happening to his grandchildren.

Sometimes forgiveness takes an unusual course. In return for his wife's forgiveness for having an affair, Ron Hall agreed to help a homeless man. Thanks to his wife's selflessness and compassion, Pratt writes, 3 lives were changed.

A conclusion from reading this book is that the world would be a far better place if we practiced

more forgiveness, like her profiles discovered. It would be less angry, less anguished and more empathetic, less vengeful and more loving . . . like Jesus on the Cross. Jesus' plea "Father forgive them . . ." Jesus taught His followers to forgive everyone, even enemies. He modeled for us the ultimate form of forgiveness.

Pratt writes "Forgiveness can feel like a betrayal of our own hurt, but when you shift that perspective and make it a gift you give yourself, you have an incredible amount of freedom. When we learn to embrace forgiveness, it opens us up to healing, hope and a new world of possibility."

Corrie ten Boom (who hid and was captured by Nazis in World War II) told a pastor about not being able to forgive a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident over and over again, and couldn't sleep. She cried out to God for help. The pastor said to her, "Up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the bell ringer lets go of the rope, the bell keeps swinging. First, 'ding,' then 'dong.' Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope, but if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

Notice what Corrie ten Boom did. She cried out to God for help. We cannot forgive on our own power; it is only by the spirit of God at work within us, that we are empowered to forgive.

Take a few moments now to pray silently and ask to be forgiven by those you have wronged and commit to forgiving those who have wronged you in the past.

Amen.