

“Forgiveness”

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Ezek. 17:22-24, 18:1-4

Mark 3:20-35

[*The LORD said,*]

‘The lives of all people belong to me—parents as well as children.

Only those who sin will be put to death.’

Ezek. 18:4

Let us pray... O God,

We hear these harsh words and wonder to whom they apply –

Echoing your disciples, we ask, ‘Is it I?’

And yes it’s true, but then you’ve said, ‘Take care of my sheep’ –

Forgiveness is implied.

Amen

The title of my sermon today is “Forgiveness” and certainly too broad a topic to cover at one time because there is so much that could be said.

Forgiveness is a foundational part of the Good News and a core value of Christianity.

It is implied in the ‘extravagant welcome of the UCC, when we say, ‘Whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.’

So, my goal is to talk about some tools for forgiveness that are available to you, to help you on your particular journey:

Confession, repentance, and the acceptance of grace – to forgive yourself, as well as to forgive others.

Confession in the Catholic tradition is a formalized rite of passage for children – and I think it is a good discipline to be encouraged, though I understand that some kids struggle to come up with something to confess for their first confession, so they lie to the priest, then confess they lied the next time. But for others it becomes no struggle at all because they have a system to absolve them without the urgency to change attitudes or behaviors.

Still, confession can be very therapeutic – sort of like a GPS system, but instead of calling upon a satellite to constantly update your whereabouts on your journey, you talk to God or talk to another person to get that perspective.

Willard, p.2

Though internal prayer can produce insight,
the spoken or written word is best to get thoughts of shame,
anger, or grief out of your head.
Writing them down in the form of a letter –
not intended to send, but to burn,
is another cathartic and proactive way towards forgiveness.

This can also be very helpful for people who have been abused –
not that they need to be forgiven,
but that they need to forgive.

By naming and acknowledging an abusive event,
a victimized person recognizes that they are not at fault
for the actions of the one who abused them.

In the process, they are enabled to forgive as an act of reclaiming
their personal power and integrity.

Reconciliation with the abuser is a different matter and
not a necessary part of a victim's act of forgiveness.

Confession of sins is linked to forgiveness in the evangelical prayer
of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior.

This also includes the repentance of sins
which was John the Baptist's challenge to people seeking baptism,
calling them to do a 'metanoia' – a 'turning around' or 'U-turn'
as preparation to make way for the Lord in their lives.

One of the first miracles in the Gospel of Mark is of Jesus healing
a paralyzed person.

This event became problematic for the religious experts there
when Jesus tells this person his sins are forgiven.

When they question this, Jesus asks them,
"What's better to say to someone who is paralyzed?"

Perhaps this fellow was saying to himself,
"If only..." –

"If only I'd been more careful, I wouldn't have broken my neck."

How often have any of us
felt that way about something in our lives?

Yet forgiveness challenges us to get up from our paralysis of fear, grief,
anger, and shame to get moving again.

The comedian Lily Tomlin says that,

"Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past."

Just another way of saying, we have to live with our mistakes.

Willard, p.3

Another lesson of this healing story about the paralyzed person
is that Jesus places the responsibility back on us to forgive, too.
It is not just God who forgives.

In the Lord's Prayer, we say,

'Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors,

'as we forgive those who trespass against us' – 'those who sin against us'.

It is part of our responsibility to forgive in this world.

A memorable line in the movie, "Love Story", says,

'Love is never having to say you're sorry'.

But that's not quite right, is it?

Love is more like always being ready to say, 'I'm sorry' and 'I forgive you'.

There is a spiritual tradition that is emphasized in the Eastern Orthodox Church
called the Jesus Prayer – 'Kyrie eleison', 'Lord, have mercy upon me'.

It is to be 'prayed without ceasing',

that is to say those who practice this tradition pray that prayer
thousands of times a day until it becomes
an automatic 'prayer of the heart'.

'Lord, have mercy upon me', 'Help me', 'Forgive me'.

This takes us back to the category of that spiritual GPS we need as we seek

to live dynamic, authentic lives, constantly self-correcting to stay on course.

So, you are checking in with the Spirit as you go along

as you seek to do the most loving thing you can do
regardless of the circumstances.

Today's Hebrew Bible reading serves as a summary of a concept

that is repeated several times throughout the Book of Ezekiel –

a remarkable summary of God's forgiveness and judgment.

It is pretty cut and dried about who lives and who dies

in the time to come.

Yet the LORD God makes a point to say that the people of Israel

have an adage such that:

"Sour grapes eaten by parents leave a sour taste
in the mouths of their children."

There are two ways of looking at this proverb:

Either that it is sad that the deeds of the parents
will sour the lives of their descendants;

Or that it serves them right that the deeds of the parents
will continue to sour the lives of their descendants.

Willard, p.4

But vindictiveness is not God's agenda according to Ezek. 18:23...

'Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD,
and not rather that [they] should turn from [their] way and live?'

Forgiveness – it seems, is a never-ending process with God,
for whom more than 70 X 7 trial & errors would still allow for a 2nd chance.
That's assuming a true effort to turn around from self-destruction
and not just lip service to avoid consequences.

Pharaoh is a good 'bad example' of those who are hard-hearted and arrogant –
unwilling to recognize the good in others and do right by them.

After each of the 10 plagues, Pharaoh acquiesced to Moses' demand to let
the Hebrew people go out of Egypt –
only to renege on his promise each time.

Confession and repentance are things we can do
to seek forgiveness and be forgiving ourselves.

But another important part of forgiveness is grace – God's grace,
and that is the form that forgiveness must take for you.

And you either recognize it or you don't; You accept it or you don't.

There is a story about the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989,
when the civilian head of state for East Germany, Erich Honecker,
at first, ordered border guards to shoot to kill
those trying to escape across the border.

This was not carried out and he was forced to resign from his post.

Even his own political party despised him, so Honecker & his wife Margot
were driven out of their house with no place to go.

However, they were taken into the home of The Rev. Uwe Holmer & his family –
who had experienced government harassment for promoting
a church youth program that competed with a national youth activity.

The First Lady, Margot Honecker, was also the head of Education,
and she personally prevented any of the Holmers' ten children
from getting into college.

Even so, the Holmers took them in when no one else would;
Eventually, the Honeckers went into exile in Chile where
Erich died and Margot continues to live.

It is reported that Margot is still alive and continues to write to the Holmers –
at least every Christmas.

<http://oldhickorysweblog.blogspot.com/2009/01/uwe-holmer-east-german-dissident.html>

Willard, p.5

Paul Tillich was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th Century – a German who spoke against the Nazis during their rise to power and had to come to America where he continued to explore the challenges of religious faith in modern times.

And Tillich said this about grace:

‘Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.

It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley
of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual,
because we have violated another life, a life which we loved,
or from which we were estranged.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference,
our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure
have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us

when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear,
when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades,
when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness,
and it is as though a voice were saying:

"You are accepted. *You are accepted,*
accepted by that which is greater than you,
and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything;
do not intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84>

I expect there is judgment for those who do not love in this world,
those who have closed their hearts & minds to God's grace,
the gift of forgiveness they already have.

But don't worry about whether or not that's you or someone you love –
let's all just keep working to keep our hearts open and affirm the good
whenever and in whatever way it shows up.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Ezek. 17:22-24, 18:1-4
introduces the concepts of God's active concern for humanity
through justice and mercy...*

22 Someday, I, the Lord, will cut a tender twig from the top of a cedar tree,
then plant it on the peak of Israel's tallest mountain,
where it will grow strong branches and produce large fruit.

23 All kinds of birds will find shelter under the tree,
and they will rest in the shade of its branches.

24 Every tree in the forest will know that I, the Lord,
can bring down tall trees and help short ones grow.

I dry up green trees and make dry ones green.

I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will keep my word.

18:1 The Lord said:

2 Ezekiel, I hear the people of Israel using the old saying,

“Sour grapes eaten by parents leave a sour taste
in the mouths of their children.”

3 Now tell them that I am the Lord God, and as surely as I live,
that saying will no longer be used in Israel.

4 The lives of all people belong to me—parents as well as children.
Only those who sin will be put to death.

Inspired by Mark 3:20-35

And they came back to his mother's house,
but there was such a throng gathered there,
that they couldn't get in for lunch.
[Meanwhile inside the house, Mary and Jesus' siblings]
heard a terrible commotion –
so they went outside to restrain Jesus,
because it sounded like he was going out of his mind with rage...

And the religious experts from Jerusalem taunted him, saying,
“It is by the ‘Lord of the Flies’ and the chief of the devils
that you cast out demons!”

And he countered them with parables, saying to them,
“How would Satan cast itself out?
Like a throne divided, would it not collapse?
Like a house divided, would it not fall down?
Thus, Satan divided will end with a crash.
But no one enters a bully's house, his goods to take.
Yet first this bully bound I'll make.
So then, the goods go free –
And is it not for their sake?”

[then ‘they’ said,
“It is he who has the evil spirit!”
And because of this, Jesus was furious,]
“I am telling you the truth!!!
All the sins and curses committed by humanity
will be forgiven.
But misrepresenting good by calling it evil
is to be blind to the Spirit of what is good!
And that cannot be undone by anyone
except oneself!”

When his mother and family had finally come,
they were calling for him to stop, but he was surrounded by a crowd.
Someone said to him,

“Your mother and your brothers and sisters
are waiting for you!”
And he answered them saying,
“Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters?”
And looking around at those gathered about, he said,
“Here are my ‘mother’
and ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’!
Anyone who does the will of God, which is simply to love,
is my ‘mother’ and my ‘brother’ and my ‘sister’.”

Mark 3:20-35

[19]...*Then he went home;*

[20] and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

[21] And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for people were saying, "He is beside himself."

[22] And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Be-el'zebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons."

[23] And he called them to him, and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

[24] If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

[25] And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

[26] And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

[27] But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house.

[28]"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter;

[29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" --

[30] for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

[31] And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him.

[32] And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you."

[33] And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

[34] And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

[35] Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

Ezek. 18:18-29

[18] As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

[19] "Yet you say, `Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live.

[20] The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

[21] "But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

[22] None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live.

[23] Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?

[24] But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die.

[25]"Yet you say, `The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

[26] When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die for it; for the iniquity which he has committed he shall die.

[27] Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life.

[28] Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.

[29] Yet the house of Israel says, `The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

