

## "A New Year's Resolution: Forgive Each Other"

(a sermon based upon **Colossians 3: 8-15**, page 201 in the New Testament NRSV)

by

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We have come to the last Sunday in 2007. It is a time to take stock of (on the one hand) *where we've been* and (on the other) *what we hope for* the future. Some of you have probably already made your "New Year's Resolutions." I applaud that exercise in *self-critique*. It's not easy to look back over one's short-comings with any kind of analytic honesty; most of us are a bit "defensive" about those things we have done wrong. Especially if it has become *habitual*. Overeating, always being tardy, using rude language, collecting too much clutter, procrastinating, *you know...*

I would like to take this last sermon of the old year to propose a healthy (but difficult) resolution for the New Year. In a word: "Forgive."

I believe that a spiritually healthy life includes a great deal of forgive-ness. *All of us make mistakes*, but the most corrosive (and long lasting) is our unwillingness, or inability, to forgive. Furthermore, I believe that the path to a lasting, fulfilling relationship with another person always leads through forgiving. However, *forgiving is not easy*, and it does not come easily in our society.

Even among Christians, who are *commanded* to forgive, many of us not only *don't WANT to*, we often *don't know HOW* to forgive. We don't see it modeled by our political leaders, nor in business. Forgiving isn't usually part of the plot in a TV show, nor is it considered a virtue among our sports heroes & celebrities. Even in our *homes*, forgiveness is not always a family norm. We have to *earn* other people's trust, and when it's broken, *we're out of luck*. *We blew it!* How does one come back to an even keel (restore a harmonious balance) after having done someone wrong?

All kinds of competing social values get in the way... For example: "*They don't deserve forgiveness.*" And that's true -- but if Jesus is to be believed, we are to forgive them *anyway!* If not for *their* good, for *ours!*

But... "*They need to learn a lesson.*" True -- but what *good lesson* does revenge or holding a grudge, or pursuing punishment, pay-back, or resentment *teach?* "*Okay, let's say I forgive this time... but what if they do it again?*" Well... we forgive again. (*Say what?*)

Apparently Peter was having this very problem when he asked Jesus *how many times* was he required to forgive: as many as seven times? "No," said Jesus, "not seven times -- *seventy times* seven times." (Matt. 18:21-22)

We may not see many examples of forgiveness around us. It may seem old-fashioned even to talk about it. But I think it is time, for our own good and for the good of our society, that we re-claim **the healing power of "forgiving"** in God's name!

The Apostle Paul had some advice for the Colossians -- a mixed-breed, mixed-bag crossroads congregation in Asia Minor. St. Paul writes:

"You must *rid yourselves* of such things as these: anger, malice, slander, and abusive language... Do not lie to each other... In our renewal, there is no Greek or Jew; circumcised or uncircumcised; Barbarian or Scythian; slave or free; but **Christ is all, and in all!**

**[If we wanted a list of New Year's Resolutions, there's a good one: rid ourselves of *anger, malice, slander, & abusive language*. Do not lie to each other. Oh, what a great day that would be!]**

"Therefore, as God's chosen people (holy & dearly loved) clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... ***Bear with one another, and forgive whatever complaints you have against one another. Forgive each other as the Lord forgave you!***

"And above all these virtues, put on love, which binds every-thing together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful."

There is so much good, pastoral advice (and affirmation) in those words, that I am tempted to preach on them all... but we have time this morning to consider only one theme from the whole: namely, **forgiving**. Let me draw your attention to these words:

***"Forgive whatever complaints you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you!"***

That is so much easier *said* than *done!* Forgiving is not easy; it is not "*normal*" *behavior* in the mainstream of human experience!

Forgiving only comes into play *when a wrong has been done* -- when someone has offended you, or you have been the target of an injustice.

Because of that offense, that hurt which has been done to you, our "normal" reaction is to demand "justice!" By nature, we look at things through a legal (or moral) system of "justice" -- fairness, "tit-for-tat" pay-back -- similar to the Torah (Old Testament) custom of demanding "an eye for an eye." The scales of justice (to use American imagery) are *out-of-balance* when a wrong has been done. We insist that things be "made right"... We want the crime to be "*paid for*" (another American image).

***Rebalancing the scales of justice...*** Extracting payment, or coming to a "settlement," after a crime has been committed (making things "right" again), a general sense of *fairness*, to us, means "*getting your just desserts*" (getting just what you *deserve!*). Paying them back for what they've done.

It's as American as Apple Pie! We hold on passionately to our demands for justice, as we build more prisons, and insist upon ever-harsher penalties. Our President, for example, speaks of "bringing the terrorists *to justice*" when what he means is that they are being captured or killed.

Demands for "justice" often escalate the rhetoric, and give rise to the call for retribution -- **paying back with additional acts of violence** for the grievance that has already been done -- until the wound (the pain, the loss and grief) is shared equally by all!

But if every "wrong" (every unjust act or unfair outcome) "**got what it deserved**," who among us would be whole? It's been said: "*If everyone demanded **an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**, soon the whole world would be toothless and blind!*" Then, where would we turn for *healing* from the on-going cycle of vengeance? Each neighbor escalating the claim on the other, in order to come out "ahead" in the end. What a vicious cycle of mutual resentment, recrimination, and inevitable *inflation* of grievances!

As I said, **forgiving** only comes into play **when a wrong has been done** -- when someone has offended you, or you have been the target of an *injustice*. The event itself is quite likely hard to face -- we have been hurt, or shamed! But we have to **face it** if we want to **fix** it.

Forgiving is difficult because it demands *unselfishness*, and we are (by nature) selfish -- *self-centered*. **It seems unfair to have to forgive**, because those who have done the wrong *don't "deserve"* our mercy!

But that's the crux -- forgiveness *is* undeserved!

To forgive is an act of undeserved **grace**, showing mercy. Grace is always "unearned and undeserved." Showing another person *mercy* -- forgiving -- says something about **you** (your heart, your values, your intentions!), it does not say anything about the one you have forgiven. Forgiving frees **the forgiver**, above all!

We are told to forgive *whatever complaints* you have against one another, **to "forgive as the Lord has forgiven you!"**

Are we forgiven by God because we *earn* it? or *deserve* it? No. That free (and freeing!) act of mercy, exemplified Jesus' own Spirit; it was the very *modus operandi* of his life.

We even hear it from his lips as he was dying on the Cross: "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**" (Luke 23:34)

Forgiving was so much at the core of his being that, even when he was dying, Jesus **asked God to forgive** the very ones who were **executing him**, knowing full well what a horrible thing they were doing to this clearly innocent man! But Jesus did so in the hope of breaking the chain of *hard-hearted retribution*... the repetitive cycle of sin & death, pain that insists on penalty and punishment as its cure! To break the chain of hurting, and the festering resentment, we are called to **"forgive, as the Lord forgave you!"**

Forgiving is not easy. It's not natural! Because it runs contrary to our sense of social justice, and because it runs contrary to our personal selfish-ness, we may not want to believe that Christians are supposed to forgive! But **it is commanded of us**, friends. We're under direct orders from the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ: "Forgive!"

**We're commanded to forgive.** It's part of Jesus' agenda for the Church, whether we like it or not. To forgive expresses the Spirit of Jesus in its most bold way -- a radical way, a socially unexpected way, a surprising & ultimately freeing way -- like nothing else. He did it; and we're to do likewise.

The Apostle Paul reminded the warring factions of the early church in Colosse -- Greeks & Turks, Romans & Jews, men & women, slaves & free -- to forgive! ***Whatever complaints you have against one another "forgive as the Lord forgave you!"*** This is one of the places where I applaud St. Paul for underscoring something essential to the Spirit of Jesus Christ -- who was the one who first commanded his followers to forgive.

Forgive ***70 times 7 times***. ***"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."*** Forgive those who trespass against us. Forgive the ones who persecute you, who spitefully use you... Yes, even ***forgive your enemies!*** Forgive, as the Lord has forgiven you!

**Forgiving is a task Jesus set for the church.** It's what shows our spirit to be "Christlike." It is how grace is made manifest; it's how love is demonstrated.

But because forgiving is not natural to the human heart, we realize that ***forgiveness is God's process***. We have our part to play in it, of course -- but forgiving is so ***unlike*** the norms of society and ***contrary*** to our personal selfcenteredness, I don't think it's possible without God's help.

And that raises another problem with forgiveness: namely, ***the guilt we feel*** when we know (because of a sermon like this one) that we are "supposed to" forgive, ***but we cannot***. The feelings of failure and confusion we have about whether we (in this instance or another) actually did or didn't forgive. ***We feel guilty*** because we know we are ***supposed to*** forgive, but we can't do it.

Like Peter, we want to find the "loophole" where we can say, ***"C'mon, Jesus. Don't you think I've forgiven enough? This is one debt that has to be repaid! If I don't draw the line, and make them pay, they'll never learn their lesson. Please, God, don't ask me to forgive THIS! This is one grievance that just can't go unpunished! This trespasser's gonna get what's coming! This time, no more Mr. Nice Guy! Three-strikes, Bud; and now you're-out! I don't get mad, I just get even. Go ahead, make my day!"*** Don't you wish you could make resolutions like ***that*** for the New Year!?

But from the Gospels (& now from the Apostle Paul, too), we know we are "supposed to" forgive. ***We know it's a direct command*** from Jesus, the Lord and Head of the Church, for the salvation of the world. ***We know it's for our own good, and for the good of the world***. It is the only way to forge "peace on earth" and extend "goodwill to all" (as the angels at Christmas sang to the world). We know that forgiving will accomplish in our lives what most psychotherapy & counseling can only dream about -- namely, ***freedom from past baggage, freedom from resentment...*** We know forgiveness has the power to heal, because ***it is God's process...*** But we just can't bring ourselves to ***do*** it. Or when we try, we don't know how.

So, in the minutes remaining, let me suggest a few thoughts about the "forgiving process"... and then we'll lift the whole matter to God in prayer.

Sometimes we mistake "patience" for forgiveness. **Being "patient," however, has a time line...** We put up with things, but "the clock is still running" on them. The irritations & events are still accumulating. We may catch ourselves saying: "*Look, I've forgiven you many times, and you should be **thankful** for that! But my **patience** has worn thin. Either you start appreciating what I've done for you, or it's over.*"

Let me say again: we all make mistakes. We have (all of us) gone through experiences where *we've* needed to "learn our lesson" -- where we've needed to mature, to repent, to change... **We've all been wrong**, or **rebellious**, angry or impatient, from time to time. We've all done things that we **regret**; things that have **hurt** the people who love us. And, most likely, there have been occasions when we've been **unappreciative** of the help that has been offered us.

We all need forgiveness. In church, we admit it right up front. We call it "confession" and it's a part of every morning prayer in every Sunday bulletin. We ask for **acquittal** by the grace of God who forgives us. But my concern this morning is with the reverse: the **mistake we make by *in-adequately forgiving*** when others have wronged **us**.

Take that simple sentence, for example: "*Look, I've forgiven you many times, and you should be thankful for that!*" This shows that there are "strings attached" to the forgiveness. **CONDITIONAL** forgiving is **not** forgiven! The **conditions** we put upon our forgiving keep us in a power contest -- a **competitive** position -- which continues to bring out the **contentious** spirit which led to the disagreement in the first place.

**PARTIAL forgiving** prevents the further development of the relation-ship. It gives the wounded party another excuse to repeat the destructive pattern, because it keeps the **wronged** party in the "righteous role" of the "critic." Break-ups between teenagers and their parents, or between spouses or siblings, even between formerly good neighbors, are a terrible price to pay for conditional, **half-hearted** forgiving.

But the flip side (**cheap** forgiving) -- where "**no strings are attached; no questions asked**"; which voices no expectations for improved behavior -- becomes an ointment that **temporarily relieves the pain** of the event, but it also **reduces the motivation** to repent.

Not only is forgiving "not easy," it doesn't come cheap! When it does, warning signs should flash: this may be **denial... avoidance behavior**. (Therapists call it "co-dependent enabling.")

The mother, for example, who seems to be ready to forgive **anything and everything** her child does -- no questions asked -- is most likely closing her eyes to the seriousness of the problem. We do it because it's a way to "**protect ourselves**" **from the shame**, or the blame, or the guilt, of mistakes that are being made as that **young person wrestles their way** toward maturity. Teenagers wage a daily struggle -- of deciding between right & wrong, deciding between selfishness & compassion -- as do we all. And in that process, we make mistakes. "Confession" means we **admit** them. As I said: *you've got to face it to fix it*. If we hope to get well, we first have to get real.

"Cheap" forgiving (offered too fast, without confession or repentance, without an offer of restitution or even any reflection) makes it easy for a person to get **deeper into** more

destructive behavior. In the long run, it is no better than "conditional" forgiving. It frees nothing.

Most of us are a blend of the two: we are quick to forgive the little things, but we hold on to **the big, deep, hurts**. Saying that we have forgiven small hurts (slights, offenses) is desirable, but too often the fact is we still *remember them* in a subconscious "tally" until "one last straw breaks the camel's back." (The therapist calls that "gunnysacking.")

*“Look, I’ve forgiven you seven times. Do you need me to recount them all? Look, I’ve about had it with you, up to here!”* **Forgiveness that keeps a record of wrongs is not really forgiven.** *“That’s 70 times, now!”*

Forgiving little things is desirable, but it is not enough. For when we hang on to **significant resentment**, *the joy we could have had with that person* is diluted. The "fresh start" that forgiveness promises (the "clean slate") isn't there.

As Christians, we know *we need to forgive* (for our own spiritual & emotional good, as well as in response to Jesus' command) *whenever the offender asks us to forgive them...* when they "beg our pardon." But some-times it is our *pride* that gets in the way. In our hurt, and in our pride, we think this offense is too big to be released by forgiveness... especially if *we've already told them off!*

We were furious and we yelled. Maybe we swore at them, or said we'd never speak to them again.

We know *we need to apologize for our behavior* which came in reaction to their initial behavior. But we're too proud. *“We’ve gotta fight fire with fire,”* we say. *“We’re just givin’em a taste of their own medicine. Putting the shoe on the other foot, let’s see how they like it! It’s their fault, after all; they started it. To forgive them is too good for them. This time, they’re gonna pay!”*

Some of us have been angry about things that have happened to us *for decades*. Hurts that we endured from another person, or by circumstances. We have *needed* to forgive, *but we haven't... and we won't!*

Perhaps we tried, but it was conditional (with too many strings attached) and it didn't work. Perhaps we tried, but it was done too cheaply (that is, we buried our grievance alive!) and it's still there. Perhaps we tried to forgive, but in our pride, **we can't let it go**. We know that **forgiving** is the only cure for resentment, but our *pride* lies between the hurt and our future health.

Holding "a grudge" is poison to a relationship. Holding "resentment within" is poison to our **spirit**. Perhaps that is the first thing for which we must pray. Acknowledging that the *grudges* we nurse, and the *resentments* we carry, are *wrong!*

And as we confess that to the Lord, we can ask for -- and receive -- God's forgiveness. This is all about YOU and *your* health. For forgive-ness, first, frees *the forgiver!*

Second, we lift up the situation (or the person) against whom the offense is taken. We talk it out with a confidant -- or with God -- *until we have some clarity* about **how it was that things had not been right**, or how that particular decision had not been a good one, or how we had been harmed in the process. And we admit (to that confidant) that being hurt by another person wounds our pride. It may be a mere scratch on the surface; but it feels like a *wound* to one's *ego*.

Finally, we admit (to ourselves and to God) that we may not yet be able to forgive, but *we can pray for the willingness to be open to the possibility* of forgiving... one day. You see, forgiving is a process over time, not an instant thing. But there are strategic moments during the process, which include... (1) recognizing our need to forgive, for our own good; (2) citing the case with clarity, & (3) asking God to help us through it. And I believe that God will do this for us, for it is *God's* process after all!

The incredible Good News that Jesus brought is that God forgives us for our sins. As we said in our Call to Worship (I John 1:9): *"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

Receiving God's forgiveness frees us from *guilt*, and usually it also frees us from *"shame"* -- that unpleasant feeling we have when we are *aware* of our guilt. Praying about our hurts & our grudges, owning up to our resentments & pride, makes *clear communication* with God possible, and enables us to receive direct support through the Holy Spirit, our comforter and guide.

That's why God devised the process of forgiveness in the first place: it works... for our good! God loves **forgiveness** because God **loves us!**

Whenever we are commanded by God to do something, remember: it is because God loves you, and knows it will work to your benefit (**in this life**, not just in eternity!).

Receiving God's forgiveness makes it possible for us to grow whole & healthy, with a personal sense of **competence**, with emotional & spiritual **maturity**, and makes it possible to develop satisfactory relationships with others. Which brings us back to today's text:

*"Bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you!"*

Having been forgiven of our sins, **we now can forgive others** for their sins against us!

Be clear about this: *forgiving does not change the other person*. It *might* make them reconsider, but that's up to them. Forgiving changes *us*, not the other person. They may hurt us again in the same way as before; they may hurt others. We should not leave ourselves open to any further abuse, but *be aware that it might happen*. And if it does, despite our efforts to rectify things, part of our response must be to forgive again -- *70 times 7!*

Forgiving does not mean *condoning* the wrong the other person has done; more often than not, it requires **confronting** them. The person who has wronged us is still responsible to God for their sins, even when we have forgiven them. Forgiving, in itself, does not change the other person; it changes us!

*Forgiving is a process that takes some time*, but it is well worth the spiritual and relational discipline that it requires. Forgiving *major hurts* is possible only with God's help. And fortunately, God *wants* to help us with it! After all, FORGIVING was JESUS' *primary method* for the Church to bring about healing & reconciliation, salvation and “shalom” -- and it is God's Process!

Let's be about that business in the New Year...

Amen.