

" Forgiving and Saying "I'm Sorry" "

(a sermon based upon **I John 1:5-10**, page 238 in the New Testament NRSV)

by

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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) mistake may be our unwillingness, or inability, to *forgive*. However, there are two sides to every apology: the offender & the offended. In other words, to be "forgiven" means *both* being able to say we're "sorry" and being able to forgive. Because we all make mistakes, the path to a lasting, fulfilling relationship with another person always leads through the process of for-giveness. Still, *it is not easy* & forgiveness isn't *modeled* much 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. We insist that things be "made right"... We want the crime to be "*paid for*" (that's an American value).

What is modeled are words like: "Now you're gonna get what's com-ing! *This time, no more Mr. Nice Guy! Three-strikes, Bud; and you're out! I don't get mad, I just get even. Go ahead, make my day!*"

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? It takes both the ability to forgive and the willingness to say "I'm sorry."

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. And 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!

But that is so much easier *said* than *done!* Forgiving is *not* easy; it is not *"normal" behavior* in the mainstream of human experience! Part of the problem is that "forgiving" only comes into play *when a wrong has been done* -- someone has offended you, or you've 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!" If you're anything like me, 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."* We sense that the scales of justice are *out-of-balance* when a wrong has been done. One party is slighted, hurt; the other party is *advantaged*. It doesn't seem "fair" (to use another core American value).

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 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. It's as Ameri-can as *John Wayne*, playing the part of an ex-Confederate soldier (in John Ford's classic Western "The Searchers") who wants revenge on the *Com-manche* who massacred his beloved and kidnapped her daughter, saying at the funeral: "*Reverend, I'm done with praying, it's time for action!*" And everyone in the audience knows what John Wayne will do.

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 -- because we have been hurt, or shamed! But we have to **face it** if we want to **fix** it. We have to **admit** that we have a **problem**. (It's the *first step* in any 12-step recovery.)

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** first!

Jesus told Peter and the other disciples that they *must* forgive *whatever complaints* they had against one another. We have the example of Jesus Christ himself, who died with words of forgiveness on his lips: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" (Luke 23:34) So, too, is the example of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. When he was about to be *stoned to death* for preaching about Jesus as the Messiah, we are told that Stephen's last words were: "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" The Apostle Paul tells the Christians of Colossae to "*forgive as the Lord has forgiven you!*" (Col. 3:13)

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

Jesus lived and died in the hope of *breaking the chain* of *hard-hearted retribution*... the repetitive cycle of sin & death, and pain, that insists on exacting a *penalty* or *punishment* as its cure! To break the chain of hurting & the festering resentment, we are 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 selfishness, we may not *want* to forgive! But *it is commanded of us*, if we are to be Christian (Christ-like). We're under direct orders from the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ: "*Forgive!*" We're commanded to forgive. It's 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. 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 what shows us to be "Christlike." It is how grace is extended; it's how love is demonstrated. And since "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 so ***contrary*** to our personal self-centeredness, I don't think it's possible to do the ***deep-cleansing forgiveness*** without God's help.

And that raises the other problem with forgiving: namely, ***one of us has to say "I'm sorry."*** But that means admitting we've done wrong, and sometimes we just don't see it that way. ***We can't do it;*** or we ***won't*** do it. Part of the intractability of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the inability of either side to admit to their own violence and mistakes. It's all ***the other's*** fault! "*They started it; we're justified. Look what *they've done* to hurt us.*"

It is here that the Bible text from the First Letter of John comes into play: "*If we say that **we have no sin**, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will **forgive us** our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have **not sinned**, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*" (I John 1:8-10)

Facing the ***truth*** is the only way to forge "peace on earth" and extend "goodwill to all" (as the angels at Christmas sang to the world). Desmond Tutu's "***Peace & Reconciliation***" hearings brought ***healing*** to post-apartheid South Africa. It is painful to face mutual grievances; the victors & victims alike must ***relive*** the pain. No one gets off unscathed; no one goes away un-changed. While we know that ***forgiving*** will

accomplish in our lives what most psychotherapy & counseling can only dream about -- namely, *free-dom from past baggage, freedom from resentment...* While we know that forgiveness has the power to heal, because **it is God's process...** Still, we just can't bring ourselves to *do* it. Or when we try, we don't know how.

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 the corollary: how do we say "I'm sorry" when we have wronged someone. For without the honest apology, forgiveness fails.

I've preached about it in the past, so just a quick refresher may suffice – S.O.R.R.Y. For an apology to be genuine, this acrostic may be helpful. S: Soon. O: Offer it. R: repentance. Second R: restitution. Y: yourself.

Soon – *as soon as you realize* that you have been at fault, that someone has been hurt by your action or inaction (whether it's a sin of "commission" or a sin of "omission") – *let them know that you realize it*. As *soon* as you are *aware* of it, make the contact and say you're sorry. The sooner the better. If you have to "eat crow," do it quickly; it always tastes better warm. S stands for "soon." Don't delay; don't let it fester. Face it!

O – offer it. Don't make them have to persuade you, cajole you, *pry* it out of you. The **reluctance** on your part to *own up* to the situation will

negate whatever healing possibility was inherent in saying “I’m Sorry.” *Offer it* and do so *as soon* as you realize the error of your ways.

Which brings us to the first “R” – **repentance**. For an apology to be genuine, there must be a sense that you’ve learned from it, and you’ll not do it again. *Repentance* simply means turning around; changing directions.

The second “R” is similar – **restitution**. If there is a way that you can “make up” for (or “repay”) or “restore” something to the way it was *before* the wrong was done, do so. Here’s where you might have to be creative. Candy & flowers may be appropriate, but *maybe not* because of the level of intimacy (romantic connotation) such an act conveys. Paying for repairs may be reasonable, but not if it’s coerced by lawyers as a financial settlement. *Showing repentance* by offering to make **restitution** is a genuine apology.

Soon, Offer it, Repentance & Restitution – **Y: Yourself**. Make it personal. A direct *face-to-face* “I’m sorry” to the grieved party is best; a phonecall is second-best. If the matter also concerns *others* (if some public harm has been done), make the apology public *to the same extent* as those. If it is something from your past, you can always write a letter; if the one “you did wrong” is no longer alive, you can pray to God about it. It’s not a bad thing to have an *imaginary conversation* with the one who is gone. It’s *never* too late to say “I’m sorry” – because *it frees you* to cite the case.

“Confession” means we *admit* our mistakes. As I said: *we’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 nor even any reflection) makes it easy for a person to get *deeper into* more destructive behavior. Cheap forgiving fixes nothing. The "fresh start" 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 our *pride* gets in the way. "*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!*" We know that forgiving is the only cure for resentment, but our *pride* too often lies between the fact of the hurt and our future health. We just don't want to have to say we're sorry!

Do you remember the 1970 movie "*Love Story*" with Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw? It's most memorable line says that "*Love means never having to say you're sorry.*" I am here this morning (38 years later) to suggest an alternative: *true love* makes it *possible to say you're sorry* and the subsequent *forgiveness* lets us *get beyond it*. Don't avoid it; don't bury it.

Holding "a grudge" is poison to a relationship. Holding "resentment within" is poison to our spirit. So it is good to *lift up the situation* (or the person against whom offense is taken) to God in prayer. We talk it out with a confidant -- 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 (and they) had been harmed in the process. We *admit* (to that confidant) that *being hurt* by another person wounded our *pride*. It may be a mere scratch on the surface; but it feels like a *wound* to one's *ego*.

It's fair to 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, both asking for it and offering it. You see, forgiving is a process over time, not an instant thing. There are strategic moments in 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 thru 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. All of them. As St. John put it: "*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Praying about our hurts & our grudges, owning up to our resentments & wounded pride, citing the case and saying that we're sorry (s.o.r.r.y.), 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!** When- ever Jesus tells us 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, emotional & spiritual maturity) and makes it possible to develop satisfactory relationships with others. Hav-ing 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 their relationship with you, or their behavior toward others, *but that's up to them.* Forgiving changes *us*, not the other person. They may hurt us again in the same way as before. We should not leave ourselves open to 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; it requires *confronting* them. The person who has wronged us is still responsible to God for their deed, even when we've forgiven them; because 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. 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...

Amen.