

## **REFUSING TO FORGIVE**

Matthew 18:21-35 (CEV)

SMITH magazine, an online community that “celebrates the joy of storytelling” invited readers to submit six-word memoirs that describe their lives. Thousands responded with brief biographies ranging from the light-hearted “Sweet wife, good sons – I’m rich” ... to the painful “Sixty. Still haven’t forgiven my parents.”<sup>i</sup>

When I read that as part of my devotions a couple of weeks ago, I stopped and let it register. “Sixty. Still haven’t forgiven my parents.” If the writer is sixty years old, chances are his or her parents are already deceased. Whether they are or aren’t, are they or were they even aware that a child of theirs is still holding a grudge? What has happened to the soul of the unforgiving son or daughter? How much damage has been done to a life carrying such a burden for so long? I shuddered when I thought of the self-imposed darkness, the bitterness that has festered for so many long years. Strangely, I never even thought of the parents, or what they went through having an unforgiving offspring. Did they even know?

At no point would I ever belittle someone that struggles with the sin of unforgiveness. Forgiving is not easy, nor is it natural. If you hurt me I’ll get even with you. I will refuse to forgive you, so there! Take that! I will get my revenge. The problem, of course, is that you may not even know about this plan I have to hold you responsible for my hurt. As you skip merrily through life you may wonder why I’m not as “friendly” as I used to be, but since careless words and actions that hurt are part of how you live, you have become callous. My seething resentment and inability to forgive doesn’t touch you at all. But it sure affects me. Its acid eats at my stomach and poisons my mind. The act that launched this becomes blown out of proportion, and as the tapes replay and the injury keeps being recounted, *I’m* the one that suffers. It’s a strange phenomenon that all my inability to forgive accomplishes is the escalation of my own hurt.

In fact, as Pastor Stewart shared with me when he saw the original draft of this message:

"Not forgiving someone is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die."

There's a scene from a movie a few years ago called "Nobody's Fool." There's a working man named Donald Sullivan. Everybody calls him Sully. He's about sixty years old, and he has spent his whole life in the same town. When his parents died, he inherited their house. He never moved in. Instead he left it alone. It was the house where his father beat him as a child. So he has left it alone, and every day he drives by to watch it slowly fall apart. One day he takes one of his friends, a builder, through that broken-down house.

The builder says, "Sully, you could have saved this place. You could have fixed it up a little bit, rented it out. You could have sold it and put the money in your own pocket.

Instead you stick it to your old man. What's it been - - thirty, thirty-five years? You still keeping score? Well, here's the good news: you won."

Meanwhile, the house is falling down!"

And I say – "Way to go, Sully! You really got even with your mean old dad for beating you! I'm sure you've hurt him real bad as he looks down over the parapets, or up, as the case may be, and he sees his bricks and mortar falling apart. And I'm sure the revenge you feel in your soul each time you drive by has really added deep meaning to your life! I wanted to add a strong epithet in my address to Sully, but I'll just say "foolish man!"

In today's Bible reading Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has done something wrong to him. Would seven times be enough? Laurine read Jesus' answer from the Contemporary English translation, and we hear Jesus saying: "Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times." In the King James translation Jesus says "seventy times seven." That's four hundred and ninety times! Almost all the translations I checked say the same, and the Message has Jesus saying: "Seven? Hardly! Try seventy *times* seven!" In other words – ad infinitum! Actually, in Hebrew numerology the number seven has the connotation of infinity. I think we're getting the message that there is no limit in the number of times you need to forgive.

Probably Peter thought he was being generous when he said "seven times." The average human being would be inclined to say "Well, I'll let you get away with it this time. But next time, watch out!" Or "That's it! You've said or done that hurtful thing too many times. I refuse to forgive you any further."

OK. Let's pause here for a moment and think about what forgiveness really is. When I forgive someone's abusive words or actions do I *excuse* them? Absolutely not. Do I roll over and take the next beating submissively? No! When someone spreads a rumour that cuts to the very core of who I am, do I do the same in return? As tempting as that is, ... as *natural* as that is, ... No! Forgiveness is a choice, just as remaining to be abused is a choice, just as getting out of there so that there is no more opportunity to be demeaned a choice. Forgiveness is something that you do, that I do, to rid ourselves of the burden of bitterness that is created when someone wrongs us. We name the wrong. We recognize the injustice of the hurt we feel. And we turn over the justice issue, the retribution, for something beyond our control to God. We don't ever have to see the perpetrator of the hurt again, but we have to forgive them. Not for their benefit, but for our own health and our own well-being.

Jesus knew that we shouldn't carry resentments throughout life. He knew that it not only sours the soul, but that un-forgiveness taints all other relationships. He wanted Peter, and each one of us to experience the liberty of forgiveness, because as we sang earlier, as we forgive so we will be forgiven. Or, to emphasize the point, the other side of the coin is "If we don't forgive others their sins against us, we don't need to expect our Heavenly Father to forgive us our sins." That's pretty clear. Quite blunt.

But, as I said: "It's not easy." Forgiveness is a divine quality that emanates from love, and so for a human it does not come naturally. Our nature without the infusion of the divine wants to get even, to have the right to nurse wounds and plot revenge. Forgiveness destroys that urge, and sets us free to move ahead. We can't experience

real freedom until we can let the weight of past hurts go. I cannot minimize how tough that is, though. There is no magic formula, although there are many self-help books that deal with this.

None of us should feel guilty if there is un-forgiveness. We should, however, let the guilt sink in forcefully if we're doing nothing about it other than rolling it around on our tongues.

I remember one instance where it was well over a year before I could let a hurt go, ... just let it go. Forgive. Even so, I never renewed an intimate friendship with the instigator of the hurt, a man I'll call Carl. He was a professional person in a position of trust, and his betrayal of a confidence shared with him about a mutual friend had hurt me deeply. My friend never even knew that this had happened. I never confided in Carl again, but I was eventually able to look him in the eye. I could shake his hand without feeling phony. And, when I attended his funeral there wasn't even a trace of resentment lingering. As far as I was concerned, that was the result of a process that was beyond my capability. It was divine. It was God's love that emerged, and that wasn't of me. And as a result I was free. The automatic replay reel-to-reel resentment tapes were destroyed, and the acidic churning in my gut was gone. With God's help I had forgiven Carl.

How did I get there? I worked at it. I prayed about it. And I daily prayed for Carl. Daily. I prayed that God would bless him, give him strength for his day. Give him grace, and make his life a good life. After all, Carl was only another human being like me, and if I dared to do a little introspection – which I painfully did – I discovered that I wasn't the flawless reincarnation of some ancient saint I might have fantasized. I can't judge Carl. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing. Maybe the gossip he spread was based on concern, and not on malicious intent. I didn't know. God knew.

I remember Someone who in far more dire straits looked at his murderers and said "Forgive them, Father. They don't know what they are doing."

A story is told of two friends who were walking through the desert. During some point of the journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand, "Today my best friend slapped me in the face."

They kept on walking until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but the friend saved him. After he recovered from nearly drowning, he wrote on a stone, "Today my best friend saved my life."

His friend asked him, "After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone, why?" The other friend replied "When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of Forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it.

"So real forgiveness keeps on leaving the sins of others and our hurts in the past. Yet Jesus understands the difficulty of such forgiveness. To keep on forgiving is a God-like characteristic. It is contrary to human nature.<sup>iii</sup>

That's why we need help.

Maybe I'm the only one here who has struggled with the inability to forgive. I'm not sure that I have ever *refused* to forgive. But I have had a difficult time. I have reversed the writing in the sand with the writing on the rock. What should have blown away, stayed. And what should have stayed, blew away.

Maybe I'm not alone. There might just be someone else here whose own soul has been burdened with grudges, sullied by resentments, accusations and bitterness. You seemingly can't forgive. If you have a clean track record yourself, have never said or done anything that has either hurt yourself, others, or God – in other words, you've never sinned, never done anything that requires forgiveness from God, I guess you don't need to worry about it too much. But if every time you say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" and you actually think about what you're praying, there's a little niggle. I would suggest that the ramifications of the parable that Jesus told Peter should rattle us into awareness, ... give us a bit of a jerk.

Not only are we dragging our own quality of life down by carrying around these people and events for which we are making no effort at forgiveness, but we are leaving ourselves wide open to forgiveness being denied for ourselves. Let me remind you of the parable we read earlier:

- 1) Huge un-repayable debt forgiven the official by the King (God)
- 2) Forgiven official throttles colleague who owes him a little, demanding a no-terms, immediate repayment.
- 3) King finds out – and forgiveness of debt for first official cancelled . He's to be punished till every penny would be repaid.

Jesus says "That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart." (Matt: 18:35 CEV)

When Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he had a question on his mind: "When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela," the former President said, "I woke my daughter at three o'clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event." Then President Clinton zeroed in on his question: "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today," said Clinton. "What was that about?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there's nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!'" <sup>iv</sup>

You can never be free to be a whole person if you are unable to forgive. And since it is a choice that we make, just as Nelson Mandela did, once our decision has been made the first step has been taken. The next step is to tell God that we need help. It may not be instantaneous help. It will probably take time. But it will happen. From the

heart of God's great love will come not only His forgiveness for us, but also will come our ability to forgive others ... and even ourselves.

---

<sup>i</sup> Our Daily Bread, January 29 2011

<sup>ii</sup> The Arithmetic of Forgiveness, William G Carter,

<sup>iii</sup> How Often Should I Forgive? Stephen Felker,

<sup>iv</sup> King Duncan