

Daily Forgiveness

In our church messages over our last few years, we've looked at just how much Biblical heroes tend to have tragic flaws. From Adam and Eve's flagrantly disobedient apple-crunching to Cain's murdering Abel, to the whale of a problem Old Noah jumped into in our children's service a few weeks ago, to the treachery Mary reminded us of in Isaac when he tricked Esau out of his birthright, these men were no angels. If God had punished without mercy, Biblical history would have been mercilessly short!

Even in the time of Old Testament kings we've studied, God had a lot to forgive. Jesus was from the House of David, and David was a good shepherd, musician, warrior, and king. Goliath was no match for him. But we've also looked at the story of David and Bathsheba. This was a king who lusted for and simply took Bathsheba, his neighbor, Uriah's wife. David got her pregnant and then tried to hide his trespass first through trickery and then by having Uriah, his own steadfast soldier, killed in battle. . . . *Not* so saintly, David! Even Solomon, Bathsheba's son who was fabled to be Israel's wisest, most just, and also richest king, married foreign women, worshipped foreign gods, and was rumored to be the origin of the split of the United Kingdom of Israel which followed his reign. Yet to all the Israelites, including Solomon, God remained a steadfast Father. Like a good father, he punished in the short run but in the long run, when they *repented*, He forgave and forgave and *forgave* his people. Hallelujah!

Let's turn now to Jesus' teaching on God's and on our forgiveness. We know these themes were central to his Gospel, and they were woven through his parables and teachings. Jesus taught that we need to acknowledge and repent our sins, but if we truly do, then God will forgive us. But there is a codicil to this agreement. As children God created in God's own image, we need to forgive those who have trespassed against us too. The one simple, short prayer that Jesus taught his followers, *The Lord's Prayer*, asks God, *each day*, to "forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who trespass against us." But, if we stop to think about it, are we able and willing to forgive others *each day*? Can we "save face" the way people in Eastern cultures do, by *asking* to be forgiven when we have transgressed? I will never forget the Cambodian who reached across an airplane seat in Phnom Penh to beg Ed to forgive him for his hitting Ed in the

face. Is our own forgiveness more than just the words when we say *The Lord's Prayer*? Or are we more likely, as David did with Uriah, to try to cover up our sins and guilt, and hope that no one notices them? I am saying *we*, not *you*, and *not* they here. Like those Biblical heroes, we all are very human!

I have always loved today's Old Testament reading, especially *Isaiah 55: verses 7 and 8*. You already know it as a soaring refrain in Handel's *Messiah*. The passage reads:

Seek the Lord that he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and abundantly pardon.

Abundantly pardon . . . it's a tall order, but it is Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet's, promise, and it is also what Jesus himself teaches us to receive and to do. And it's not just words! Remember how Jesus, when he hung on the cross, cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It seems that neither repentance nor forgiveness are automatically a part of human nature, but with daily practice and *The Lord's Prayer*, maybe, just maybe . . .

Forgive me if I jump through time and world views for a moment, but I am a cognitive psychologist, not a theologian, and I can't resist talking about how research suggests forgiveness affects our own lives. Psychological experiments and statistics show that those who are able to forgive and/or be forgiven (and the two don't always go together) live happier, healthier, and even longer lives. I have a theory about why this might be true that I would like to explore with you.

In her birthday message here last week, Patricia Adams spoke about *Time*, 75 years of personal time in her case. I don't pretend to be able to define *Time* or to revisit all of her possibilities, but I often think of our working out our own histories and our culture's and other culture's histories through a rich *tapestry of time*, as we experience it. Our many strands and stories are richly interwoven, and they are far more interesting and important when interrelated than when we look at each as a separate, unconnected happening, the way kids look at Bible stories. But in the give and take of weaving, things can get badly tangled, knotted, mis-

understood, and too often **stuck**. Fishermen, think of the hopeless tangles in your line. Knitters, have you ever sworn at your knitting? We can find ourselves unable to think or move, unable to get beyond how our anger is justified or how unfairly we are being treated. It is easier simply to excuse or rationalize our own actions or just cut off the thread. *Unfriend 'em!* *Forgiveness*, both forgiving and being forgiven, is not so easy, but it allows us to fix these knots and tangles and then to create more possibilities for the next day's choices. It allows us to look beyond ourselves to God's, nature's, and other people's needs and beliefs . . . and maybe, if we're lucky, to see a broader piece of the tapestry than we did when caught up in our own self-vindicating story.

If this theory seems simple-minded, consider that our own bodies already have an automatic mechanism to release anger and smooth out tangled thought each day, much as *The Lord's Prayer* prays for. Every night our bodies demand that we get sleep, and our sleep heals, unties mental knots, sorts out what we have learned, and makes connections our conscious brain cannot. I don't know about you, but every morning I wake up feeling stronger, more vital, happier, and more lucid than I was when I laid down.

Let me draw one more brain image, this time from Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's disease involves the growth of neural or glial *tangles* and knots in the brain. It blocks the smooth flow of information along the neural highways. These tangles keep their victims from accessing memories and knowledge . . . and eventually, even from recognizing their loved ones. As the disease progresses, Alzheimer's can and does turn friends and families into strangers. It can destroy the order and peace that memory and our old tapestry of time bring to our own lives. So can *not forgiving*.

Let's momentarily muse over two magical tools in today's world which Jesus, to the best of my knowledge, did not have: *the Internet and the Media*. Here in the 21st century, we have instantaneous communication, and we have far more access to information than we ever could have imagined when most of us were children. But like most of our tools, the Internet and our media can be used for good or for evil.

But that is not what is happening today in America, and, as a society, we are becoming frighteningly divided and polarized. If we tweet or post in anger, we forget that our emotional brain goes on line faster than our rational one. We tend to communicate emotionally and immediately, before we have time to reflect, and maybe only with the people and groups who agree with us. As a result, political thought seems to have forsaken the normal bell-shaped distributional curve and lumped itself more into what I call *barbell-shaped* distribution, with a liberal side and a conservative side, far right and left, each *not* communicating with the other, forgiving, compromising, or moving things forward. The tempering hump of people usually in the middle of the traditional bell curve seems to have gone on a political starvation diet, and we're stuck, unable to move and unable to compromise.

So let me end with a prayer, specifically the *Lord's Prayer* again, for *daily* peace and forgiveness, *both* for our own sins and transgressions *and* for those of others. *We can do this* (a Cerny mantra), at least here and now in this beautiful chapel and valley we all love. A few minutes and acts beyond our usual comfort zone, when made daily, can go a long way and even grow into habits. To steal one of Ed's favorite sayings, "Every day in every way, we are getting better and better." Well, maybe not, but, hey, you never know . . .

Sally Cerny