

“Forgive One Another”

Matthew 18:21-35 • Colossians 3:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • July 16, 2017

This morning we continue our series on the “one another” commands of the New Testament as a way of discussing what it means to be the church. Last week we looked at the big one, love one another. Remember that the command to love one another is the most important of the commands because all of the others are really practical ways we actually go about loving one another. So this morning we are going to talk about another big one, forgive one another.

Forgiveness is one of the key concepts of the Bible. One writer said, “the whole biblical story hangs on God’s willingness—even eagerness—to forgive.” And it’s true. The sin that caused the broken relationship with God and with each other is recorded in the first couple of pages of the Bible. You could say the rest of the book is about God’s plan to forgive and restore the relationship between us and God. We kind of like that story. It’s when each of us realizes the depth of our own sin that we can finally understand the Bible.

There’s a problem, though. As much as we like to be forgiven, both by God and by the people we hurt, we’re not so excited about forgiving people who hurt us. When we’ve been wronged we want to defend our rights. And we want revenge. We want to make sure the other person is punished. Here’s the thing: that’s not the way of Jesus.

On October 2, 2006 in the quiet little Amish community of Nickel Mines near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Charles Roberts, a milk truck driver, burst into a tiny, one-room school house, heavily armed, and shot ten young girls, killing five of them, before taking his own life. In the minds of many people, Charlie Roberts had done the unforgivable.

That’s what made the response from the Amish community so amazing. I don’t know that any of us can really appreciate the grief that those families involved experienced. But in the midst of their grief they surprised and

inspired people around the world by publicly forgiving the killer and his family. More importantly, they didn’t just say they forgave him, they demonstrated it.

Later that week the Roberts family held a private funeral for their son and husband and father, Charlie. As they arrived at the gravesite, about 40 of their Amish neighbors, some of whom had just buried their own daughters the day before, came from around the side of the cemetery and surrounded them in a show of love, hugging the members of Charlie’s family. Roberts’ mother Terri said, “Love just emanated from them.”

This doesn’t mean they had gotten over what happened. They continued to grieve their losses. But they also understand biblical forgiveness and they demonstrated it. Even in their unfathomable grief, these Amish families demonstrated what Paul meant when he said, “Put on, then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

God is very clear in His Word that not only are we to seek His forgiveness, we are to forgive others. Our willingness and ability to forgive directly affects our relationships with one another but it also directly affects our relationship with God. But before we can talk about what forgiveness actually looks like, let me just say a little bit about what forgiveness is *not*.

First of all, forgiveness doesn’t minimize or excuse sin. Forgiving doesn’t mean pretending that it never happened or that it’s not a big deal. Real forgiveness means recognizing the hurt that’s been caused and choosing to forgive anyway. Second, forgiveness is not just the diminishing of pain over time. It’s true that as

time goes by some of the pain will decrease. But forgiveness is not passive. It's an active process. Third, forgiveness isn't just choosing not to get even. Sometimes we might say something like "I forgive you but I'm not sure I can trust you again." That's not really forgiveness, it's just a cease-fire. And fourth, forgiveness is not merely a feeling. In fact, many times forgiving is the last thing we feel like doing. But if we wait until we feel like forgiving, it will probably be too late.

So now that we know what forgiveness is NOT, what *is* it? We can get some clues from our passages today. First of all, forgiveness is a gift. The word Paul uses in verse 13 comes from the root word for gift. It's the same root as the word "grace." In other words, forgiveness is not something that is earned or deserved. It's something we give to the person who has hurt us. This means that forgiveness is a conscious, active choice we make. You choose to forgive.

Second, forgiving means giving up something. When you choose to forgive you are intentionally giving up your rights – your right to be angry, your right to get even, even your right to avoid the other person. Paul says in verse 8 that to be in relationship with one another we must give up "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk." He goes on that we are not to lie to one another. Instead we are to have "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another."

This idea of giving up something as part of forgiving is what Jesus means in our reading from Matthew 18. The word translated here as forgive literally means to give up or let go of something. That's a great way of looking at forgiveness. We can either hold on to the bitterness and anger, which will eat away at us, or we can choose to let go.

Third, forgiveness is actually an act of faith. It means putting the matter in God's hands. As we see in our passages this morning, the way we forgive other people directly affects our relationship with God. Paul says, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

Jesus is even clearer. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus says that our refusal to forgive others puts our relationship with God in jeopardy. That's serious. In the parable the king tells the unforgiving servant, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Then Jesus says the king had the servant jailed. Here's the sobering part. Jesus says, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

When Jesus gives the disciples the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 he says to pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And then to make sure they understood what he meant he added, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Your experience of God's forgiveness is closely tied to your forgiveness of other people. Notice that each of these Scriptures is addressed to the person who was wronged. The way of Jesus is usually radically different from the way of the world. Now let me be clear. Jesus also tells us that if we've hurt someone we are to seek forgiveness. In Matthew 5 Jesus says that if we are at the altar praying and remember that someone has something against us, we are to leave and go reconcile first. In other words, it will affect our worship if we haven't sought their forgiveness. But the Bible speaks much more about us forgiving others.

So this all sounds great but how do we actually practice forgiveness? What does it look like in real life? Ken Sande, who has written several books and group studies on peacemaking, gives us four practical steps to forgiveness. He calls them the "Four Promises of Forgiveness."¹ These are four promises that

¹ <http://peacemaker.net/project/four-promises-of-forgiveness/>

you and I need to make in order to practice forgiveness.

The first promise is, "I will not dwell on this incident." This means I'm choosing not to replay it in my head, thinking about how you hurt me or how I can get back at you. Instead I choose to let go of it, placing it in God's hands. The second promise is, "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."

Sometimes we just want to file away the grievance and save it for later. We treat them sort of like the city treats parking tickets. After enough are issued and not dealt with they impound your car. Forgiveness means choosing not to hold on to the offense in order to bring it up later, just as God promises never to bring our sins to mind again.

The third Promise of Forgiveness is "I will not talk to others about this incident." Sometimes when we've been wronged we want everyone to know about it. It's our way of getting even. According to Sande, forgiving means not gossiping about it or spreading rumors. It means giving up the right to talk about it to other people.

And the fourth promise is, "I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship." This is probably the hardest one. Biblical forgiveness means reconciling, restoring the relationship. We can't just say, "I forgive," and then avoid the other person all together. That's not forgiveness.

In the years since the Nickel Mines tragedy, the families of the victims have built real, loving relationships with the family of Charlie Roberts. His mother Terri, who is battling cancer, helps take care of one of the survivors who is in a wheelchair and needs a feeding tube. Once a week she spends time with the girl who is now a teenager. She helps bathe her and brush her hair and she reads to her. Out of forgiveness has come love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony." I pray that each one of us will learn to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us.

Amen.