

“The Difficulty of Forgiveness”

a sermon by

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Text: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’” (Mark 2:9).

A friend of mine who is a minister, recently related to me an experience that had taken place several months ago in his church. He had preached a sermon on “Forgiveness” in which he related that as a divorced minister, one of the most difficult experiences for him in the process of healing had been learning to forgive himself. After the worship service had concluded, as he was walking through the sanctuary, he saw a young couple sitting in the pews. It was obvious that the young woman was very upset and was crying profusely. When he approached the couple, he could see that both of them were experiencing a great deal of emotional difficulty. As he looked more closely at them, he recognized them. The woman was Amy Grant and she was sitting next to her husband Vince Gill. Amy Grant is a well-known singer, primarily known as one of the rising stars in the field of “Christian Music.” Several years ago, she went through a difficult divorce in which she was severely criticized, particularly by those who thought her

divorce had betrayed her faith. As she spoke to the minister, acknowledged the pain of divorce and the difficulty she had of trying to forgive herself.

I.

To speak of the forgiveness of sins is to speak to the very heart of our faith. For forgiveness speaks in personal terms of the kind of reconciling love we think of when we think of God, and also of the Christian way. It is not an accident that in the Apostles' Creed, the forgiveness of sin follows after the confession of faith in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, and the communion of saints. For forgiveness is a gift of God's spirit, not something we work for or obtain as a reward.

So what is the meaning of forgiveness? At its heart it is the ability to look back on the way from which we have come without being decimated by the power of our mistakes. It is the ability to be thankful for our lives, and especially our past, which is both blessed by good and marred by bad and to press on to what lies ahead without shame or regret. Karl Barth once said that we ought to remind ourselves over and over of the meaning of forgiveness. "Every day," he wrote we should begin the day with the confession: "I believe in the forgiveness of sin." "At the time of our death" he observed, "there is little else we can say."

Now, sin is a word that often leads to misunderstanding. Sometimes we think of sin as the gross inequities of life--murder, robbery, sensuality, and drunkenness. These clearly are sins. But add to that the sins of temperament--sullenness, vindictiveness, pettiness, jealousy, and envy and one is aware that often these do more damage than some of the sins of passion.

Then, too, there are the sins of social attitude. In 1994 one of the greatest acts of brutality was committed in the African nation of Rwanda where Hutu peasants killed nearly a million of their Tutsi neighbors. Rwanda is by and large a Christian nation, but the church in Rwanda did very little in the midst of that terrible struggle. Most of us, I suspect, could not name one person who was involved in that ethnic cleansing though it was the greatest act of genocide in the past fifty years.

In addition, there are sins of neglect. It is not only the things we do that hurt others, it is also the things we do not do that haunt us: the letters we did not write, the words we did not speak, the phone calls we did not return.

Sins of the flesh, sins of temper, sins of social attitude, sins of neglect. There are probably others, but that probably takes in most of us.

II.

This morning I want to stress the difficulty of forgiving sins. In the passage from which we read in Mark's gospel, we read of Jesus' healing a paralytic man. Most scholars have observed that there are really two stories here: one a healing story; the other a dispute between Jesus and the Scribes over the authority of Jesus to heal. One of the most difficult aspects of this text is the

question Jesus raises: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’”

At first this sounds strange from Jesus. Of all people we would have thought it easy for him to forgive. He said so many wonderful things about forgiveness. He exhibited it in his own life, especially on the cross. One might think that it spontaneously overflowed from him. But it was difficult for Jesus to forgive sin.

III.

In the first place, it was difficult for Jesus to forgive sin because he took it seriously. It is easy to condone sin, to make light of it. Most of us don’t want to be viewed as “judgmental” so we are very reluctant to criticize the actions of others or even ourselves.

In 1965, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked the citizens of this country--black and white--to join him in voter registration in Alabama, one of the people that answered that call was a young Presbyterian Minister by the name of James J. Reeb. On March 11, 1965, James Reeb was killed by a group of white assailants as he sought to register people to vote. His death was part of the motivation for the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson to introduce to the Congress the Voting Acts Right of 1965.

At the funeral of James Reeb, Martin Luther King, Jr. raised the question “who killed James Reeb?” On one level, King noted, the answer was simple. He was killed by a few, sick, demented, and misguided men who sought to take the law into their own hands.

But King went on to say that there were other factors that led to the death of James Reeb. King noted, “ He was also murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass window. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement agent who practices lawlessness in the name of law.” Therefore, when you hear someone talking about forgiveness in a lighthearted and easy manner, you may be sure of one thing. That person is not talking about the forgiveness of sin, but the condoning of sin, and that is an altogether different affair. To say that sin does not matter, to make light of it, to take it easily, to be gracious and tolerant about it--there is plenty of that but it is not forgiveness. It is moral looseness. To condone sin is easy; to forgive it is hard. Which is easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Stand up and take you mat and walk.”

IV.

In the second place, Jesus found it hard to forgive sins because he had a great love people. Now, at first that seems strange. Naturally we think that if we love people, we would find it easy to forgive. But Jesus understood that when you love someone, and another wrongs that person it is hard to forgive. And sin does hurt others. We speak today of “victimless crime,” but there are few things that do not effect others.

One of the most powerful stories of the Old Testament is the story of Joseph and his brothers. The Book of Genesis tells us that Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him, so one day, when he came to the fields, they sold him into slavery, took his coat and soaked it in the blood of an animal and returned to their father telling him that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Now suppose Joseph’s brothers had come to their senses and been overcome with remorse and guilt. Suppose they had told the truth to their father and sought his forgiveness. Can you not hear their father’s first question and as he struggled with his sorrow and grief--Where is Joseph? What has become of him? You ask me to forgive you, but your sin is not simply between you and me. Where is your brother, Joseph?

When you love people, it is hard to forgive sin. Certainly that was true of Jesus. He was excessively hard on the Scribes and Pharisees. “Beware of the Scribes and Pharisees,” he said, “They devour widows’ homes and for a pretence make long prayers.” Jesus had seen first hand the harm that these people had done. He was hard on a wealthy man by the name of Dives because he had seen the damage that Dives had done to a poor man named Lazarus. He was hard on the Priest and the Levite who passed by a man injured on the road to Jericho, because he knew how this man had suffered.

When you love people, it is not easy to forgive sin.

V.

Then, thirdly, forgiveness is difficult because it is hard for a person to receive it. Now, at first that may seem strange. Most of us would think that forgiveness is one of the most wonderful things that can happen to a person. But, in fact, it is one of the most difficult. To hurt someone you love, to be alienated from that person, to be ashamed of yourself and then by free forgiveness to be restored to the old friendship and trusted again. That is one of the most humiliating things that can happen to a person. If there were any other way out of such a dilemma, then most of us would take it. For, you see, there is only one thing that forgiveness does--one thing only. Forgiveness does not take away the fact of sin. It does not take away the memory of sin. It cannot and does not take away the consequences of sin. But the one thing that forgiveness does- it reestablishes a relationship that that been broken and it gives that relationship a chance to be mended and made whole.

That is why, when Christians have spoken of forgiveness, they have always associated with the cross of Christ. Every theory of the atonement has in common one great factor. The cross of Christ means that it was not easy for God to forgive. It cost. And that is true in life itself.

For a husband to forgive a wife, for a wife to forgive a husband, for a child to forgive a parent or a parent to forgive a child--all of these things demand great love, great character, great integrity--and it is never easy.

That is why, when the gospel has invited people to forgiveness, it has never invited them to a lighthearted place where sins are condoned. It has called them to the cross. And they have always heard the cross saying that it was even hard for God to forgive. It cost. It cost what it always cost for forgiveness to take place: the innocent have to take on the burden of the guilty, and that is never easy.

VI.

Everything we have said today finally leads to this. No one's sin is every done with until it has come through the process of forgiveness. Either your sin has been forgiven or it is still in you as sin. This is universal fact that has been witnessed by great literature from Shakespeare's Macbeth to Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter. Counselors and psychiatrists have witnessed it as well. Either your sin is forgiven, or it resides in you as sin.

Every minister knows that beneath the respectability exterior in their congregation lies a great deal of unresolved guilt and the deep need for forgiveness. Somewhere in all our lives there is that secret place. Unlock that hidden door. Take out that unforgiven sin. For your own sake, get rid of it. There is only one way. It is the way of the cross--penitence, confession, restitution, and pardon.

Amen!