

“Forgiveness”
Psalm 32:1-6, Romans 3:21-26, Matthew 18:21-35
March 8, 2020

The evangelist Dwight Moody tells the story of a man who thought he was going to die. He was terrified that he had not set his proverbial house in order, that he was not ready to meet his Maker. And so he called an old enemy - not to settle old scores, but to extend, as best he could, his forgiveness. But the ordeal took so much out of him that he hastened to add to his erstwhile enemy, “Mind you, if I get well again and recover from this, the old grudge holds good.”

How hard it is, sometimes, to forgive! It is not difficult to see why G. K. Chesterton, who wrote the Father Brown Mysteries that can be seen from time to time on Public Television, said something like “Christianity is a great religion except that nobody has tried it yet.” It isn’t easy to forgive seventy times seven, or even seven times seven, especially if you’ve betrayed by a trusted friend, been turned on by a coworker, had your property ravaged by a vandal, or your sanctuary invaded by a burglar.

How can we bury the hatchet and start over when we see loved ones hurt, innocents punished, hostages taken? Because if forgiveness is really needed, it is not needed so much with the little things of life, but with the greater injustices. And yet if we cannot forgive the little things that call for it, we will never graduate to the bigger. Just as if we cannot forgive our friends, then how can we forgive our enemies?

What IS forgiveness? Sometimes children have a way of coming to the heart of a matter. Adults like to get fancy, or like to talk around a subject. The longer the explanation, the more important or true it must be, right? Or maybe sometimes adults are embarrassed by a topic, so if they wrap it up with enough words, maybe it won’t cut them to the quick. But a child was once asked what forgiveness is, and gave this answer: Forgiveness is the smell that flowers give off when they have been stepped on.

By this definition, it is in the very nature of flowers to forgive. It is natural. They can do no other. Why is it that people are not the same?

I don't know much about biology, but I can tell you that people are a little more complicated than the flowers of the field, who toil not, neither do they spin. Maybe that is why our Father in heaven cares all the more for you than for the lilies of the field, which are more glorious than Solomon was in all his splendor.

Yes, we human beings are complicated! And so forgiveness is, too. Christ told us that we are to forgive our enemies. The unspoken assumption was that we would already be more than willing to forgive our friends. But how many of us are willing, are able, to forgive ourselves?

Someone has said that it is only one step to get from "toleration" to "forgiveness." But how many of us find it difficult to tolerate ourselves? Scripture reminds us that whoever cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass, for in order to be forgiven, we must ourselves forgive. But how many of us break the bridge of forgiveness when it comes to our own, personal, inner lives, our own sins against ourselves, our secret trespasses against others that no one need ever find out about? Can we forgive ourselves for such things? And if not, how can God's forgiveness be ours, if we cannot even forgive ourselves?

When missionaries first visited an Eskimo tribe up in Canada, they were amazed to find that the local language did not have a word for forgiveness. Like many other translators, then, they were forced to make up a word, using ideas which the language already had, and then stringing them together in a new way. What they came up with was this: forgiveness in the Eskimo language is a word which means "not being able to think about it anymore."

How many of us are NOT able to think about it anymore? Are we like the old man Moody talked about, who said, "Mind you, if I get well again and recover, the old grudge holds good." How many of us are troubled in mind or in spirit not only because of what others have done to us, or we have done to others, but because of what we are doing to ourselves?

All too often we are our own worst judges. We set standards for ourselves that we can never possibly begin to meet, and then turn on ourselves when we fail. Why should this be so? I'm not a trained psychologist, but I don't think that kind of question has to be answered from the pages of Psychology Today magazine. I think that the answer to this question was answered a long time ago by the Apostle Paul, and I think most of us know where he got his answer from.

Paul noticed that there is an impossible standard for us to meet. That standard can be expressed in many ways. What is called the Old Testament Law consists of 613 rules and regulations for perfection. If you cannot handle 613 laws, you can condense it down to the most important ones, the Ten Commandments. If that is still too much, Christ narrowed it down even further to what he called the First and Greatest Commandment, loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And then Christ adds that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But Paul recognized that even bringing it down to only one rule was not enough so that ordinary people like you and like me could succeed at carrying it out, observing that all have "missed the mark" (a phrase we now translate as "sinned") and fallen short of the glory of God.

But the Bible doesn't stop there. Immediately, Paul goes on to say that all are forgiven by God's free grace alone. That is to say, our failures are not the final word about who we are and how God views us.

There was a queen who had suffered much from her rebellious subjects. But one day they surrendered their arms, threw themselves at her feet, and begged for mercy. She pardoned them all, much to the disgust of her prime minister, who vehemently argued for swift and total vengeance. "Did you not say that every rebel should die?" he seethed. "Yes," replied the queen ever so quietly. "But I see no rebels here."

In asking forgiveness, all that is imperfect is forgotten. All that is less than true is excused. All that is broken is healed. But this comes if and only if we are first willing

and able to forgive not just our enemies, not just our friends, but ourselves. Let us learn to accept forgiveness not just from our neighbor, but from the only One who has the real and true power to forgive us our debts, once we have forgiven those who are indebted to us.

Let us pray: