

“It’s About Forgiveness”  
Scripture: 1Timothy 1:12-18  
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Today’s sermon is so Biblical that we could take hours just looking at Scripture...which we will not do though some might enjoy the hours of sleep that would provide them! Over a century ago, Mark Twain said that if you took every person who fell asleep in church and laid them down side by side...why, they would be a lot more comfortable! But I digress.

Today’s sermon is so Biblical we could look at numerous texts. It is about forgiveness. Contrary to some opinions, this theme is not just central to the New Testament—the Old Testament also proclaims forgiveness. So, for example, today we could read from Psalm 103:

<sup>8</sup> The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
<sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.  
<sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

We could turn to Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness. How many times should I forgive another person? Seven times, Peter wonders. Peter is willing to give more than a second chance but Peter is not even close. Jesus says: Seventy times seven! (Matthew 18:21-22)

In one of the most radical statements of Paul, he tells the Christians in Corinth that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and not counting our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:19). Not counting our sins against us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we have the words of Jesus from the cross, a word addressed to those who have conspired to put him to death: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those were not asking for forgiveness, for those who were not admitting they were wrong, and for those who were convinced that Jesus was the problem. Then in our text today, Paul tells his own story. He had once been a complete enemy of church of Jesus Christ. Paul did not ask for forgiveness...he is just given it. Paul’s story is an answer to the prayer of Jesus from the cross.

**1** Timothy 1:12-17: <sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, <sup>13</sup> even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

It is about forgiveness.

A few years ago, researchers at the University of Michigan did some polling on forgiveness. Six in ten Americans say they have forgiven themselves for past misdeeds and an even larger percentage—three in four—say God has forgiven them for mistakes, But only about half—52 percent—said they have forgiven others for major wrongs done to them, and only slightly more than four in ten say they have ever sought forgiveness from others.

That is too bad. A few years ago, the John Templeton Foundation began funding, with an initial \$10 million grant, research into forgiveness. There is even now a separate organization called the Campaign for Forgiveness, with website “[forgiving.org](http://forgiving.org).” People like former president Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have been involved. Desmond Tutu, you may recall is a black South African who has been a leader in truth and reconciliation in that country following the terrible years of apartheid. At the website of the Campaign for Forgiveness, you can find summary of the sponsored research: one evident conclusion is that higher levels of forgiveness go hand-in-hand with higher levels of emotional health, physical health, and overall contentment in life. On their website, there is further information about the practices of forgiveness.

It is about forgiveness. Fredrich Buechener, a Presbyterian minister and writer, once offered this reflection on the sin of anger, which in classic medieval theology was considered one of the seven deadly sins:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fredriich Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

Haven't you known someone who held a grudge, a hurt, a wrong for years? An estrangement with someone when there had been a time of closeness? A friend, a sibling, ex-spouse, even a parent. Years afterwards, at almost every social gathering the hurt is as fresh and the anger is as strong as if it had happened the previous week. The rehearsal of the tragedy becomes a sort of unchangeable tradition: we have to tell the story over and over again. It is as regular as sun rising in the morning.

The fault finding may be absolutely right. There are some complete innocents. This would be rare, but it is conceivable. There may be innocence, but there is no freedom. It is hard work carrying that bitterness, but I know a lot of hard-working people, don't you? That anger and resentment is energizing in a perverse sort of way. But can they...can you...can I be free?

This summer I received one of those stinging hurts that has lived on in my retelling of it. It was an issue about publishing some writing that I had done. I found that every time I told the story, I relished telling how I had done the right thing, how my integrity had been questioned, how incompetent and dastardly were those that had wronged me. I never could get free. I relished too much the telling of how I had been wronged. Unfortunately I still do...but the skeleton at the feast is me.

It is about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is about what we offer others, that's for sure. But forgiveness is also about what we receive. Most every Sunday we begin worship with a prayer of confession. Some have questioned why we begin with such a "downer." Why do we have to pray this prayer that does not fit who I am? Of course, when we pray, "we have left undone those things which we ought to have done and done those things that we ought not to have done," I am not sure to whom that does not apply. One practice, incidentally, that some of our members have adopted is to take their bulletin home and place that prayer of confession in a prominent place in their house: on the refrigerator, at their desk, on their mirror. As they rehearse it throughout the week, the words become more authentic and real.

But let's get back on track: forgiveness is about what we receive. As hard as it is to forgive someone else, it is sometimes harder to ask for and receive forgiveness. To ask for forgiveness means to acknowledge that we have failed someone else. I for one am not into admitting my failure. Here's how it goes for me: I am not sure I have failed you...you must have misinterpreted me...you must be wearing your feelings on your sleeve...you are expecting too much from me...you are just as much at fault as I am. I am only human. In fact, why don't you get out of my life! That's my response, all too often.

To ask for and to receive forgiveness is to say: I have not fulfilled your needs (and granted I may not be able to fulfill your needs). To ask for forgiveness is a way to say our relationship is key. Our bond is vital. I will not let go of that relationship.

The week before Thanksgiving has never been the same for me since 1997. In the days just

before Thanksgiving of 1997, two members of this congregation were murdered...murdered by their son. That son is now on South Carolina's Death Row. I personally have never been a strong advocate against capital punishment. For me, death is not as bad as the dying. It was hard to see how capital punishment has even been administered fairly in this country. Money, power, education, and race skewed the application.

I was asked to testify on behalf of the defendant in the trial...to testify in that stage of the trial where the guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion and the only question was the sentencing: life without parole or the death penalty. Again, there was no real question of guilt or the brutality of the deaths or even of premeditation (there was some planning that that went into the murder). There was no real question of the hurt shared by friends and family: it was overwhelming. The only real question: what was the sentence to be?

As one member of this congregation who also testified put it so much more eloquently than I could, the victims, the parents, if they could have had a voice in that court room, they would have said: "Do not kill my child." They would not have said, "Let him go" or "Forget about it." They would have said, "Do not kill my child."

Yes, there is responsibility. Forgiveness is not amnesty that says, "The past does not count." Years ago, when Pope Paul forgave the man who shot him in an assassination attempt, there was no suggestion that the man be released from prison. So, yes there is responsibility.

Yes, there is a matter of trust. Every fall I seem to catch that comic strip Charlie Brown when the character Lucy puts the football on the ground and says to the Charlie Brown: "Come kick this ball, Charlie. I will hold it for you." And every year Charlie Brown runs up to kick the ball. I want to yell, "Don't try to kick it, Charlie!" but he goes ahead. Lucy always pulls ball away at the last second. Charlie Brown ends up kicking the air and flopping down on his back. So, no, forgiveness is not the same as "trust."

Central to who we are as followers of Jesus Christ is that our very life comes from forgiveness. We are built around the forgiveness of sin. We are coming up on that season when we will hear again the message of the Nativity story of Matthew: the message to Joseph is Mary "will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

You may have heard of the pastor who asked a Confirmation Class: What must you do before you can expect forgiveness from sin? After a long awkward pause, the pastor asked again: What must you do before you can expect forgiveness from sin. Then there was a tentative answer: "I guess you have to sin." Got that right!

Week by week, we pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Whatever else that means, it means we are to practice a forgiveness like the forgiveness of God. We all have done enough to qualify as debtors...as sinners. We all have the prerequisite for the forgiveness of sin. We have left undone plenty and we have done "it" plenty: we all have Ph.D.'s in this practice. No, maybe we have not murdered our parents, but I am not sure that I know a child that has not

wished that at some point or another.

It is about forgiveness...holding onto a relationship, even when there are consequences and even when there is no trust. In one of those high moments of prophetic consciousness—that's when a prophet dares to speak in the name of God...dares to speak for God with "I" and "me" and "my"—the prophet Hosea speaks for God as one who is struggling with what to do with his anger. God, as exemplified through Hosea, is having an internal struggle. God is struggling with what to do with a people who have not been faithful in their service. Oh they were religious and said the "right things" but it was hollow religion, a religion that was practiced on the Sabbath and forgotten the rest of the week. God has had it with Israel. Now Hosea uses some names that we might not immediately recognize. Ephraim is another name for the people of Israel—sort of a "pet name" of affection. Adamah and Zeboiim are names for Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that were completely destroyed by the wrath of God.

Here is what God says (Hosea 11):

<sup>8</sup> How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
<sup>9</sup> I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.

How can I give you up? I cannot, says God. I cannot give up on our relationship. I am God and not mortal. I will bear the pain of our broken relationship...it is about forgiveness.