

“...as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

August 9, 2015

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC

A few weeks ago at the end of worship I invited the congregation to thank three people for being a positive influence in your life and to forgive four to be reconciled.

As someone left the sanctuary that day, they challenged me that the message was good, but I needed to tell them *how to forgive*. Another said they could not come up with four people to forgive and so I asked her for forgiveness because I needed to and that brought her up to two. She had also forgiven herself about something.

The next day I received an email with this situation described.

*“I understand MY forgiving a wrong [done] to ME and have no trouble with it; BUT,... the concept seems to also forgive someone who has hurt ME and doesn't know or believe that she has wronged me.*

*Do I need to TELL the person that I forgive her?*

*Do I tell myself that I forgive her and tell God, and it is forgiven?”*

Here is my response. And I qualified it by writing that I do not like to have these kinds of conversations by email. They are best in person.

“I think the same thing about forgiveness sometimes, but also wonder if I am not recognizing when I hurt someone's feelings or when someone hurts mine and I don't let them know. I think the second kind is harder for me.

“If someone hurts my feelings and they don't know it at the time, it is usually because I don't tell them. Then I often make things worse, at least for me, because I carry a grudge—a grudge I allow to grow because they hurt my feelings AND they didn't realize it AND I didn't let them know either.

“Then the grudge grows in me and forgiving them becomes that much harder because of the time between the event taking place where my feelings were hurt, and the time I let the other person know how I felt. I have heard it described like letting a burden charge rent in the apartment of my soul. It takes up time and energy to nurture that grudge and then it gets out of proportion to what it was originally. Finally the grudge doesn't fit in the apartment any longer and I must get rid of it.

“So, in times like those, I need to first forgive myself for not standing up for my feelings at the time I felt hurt. I also need to let go of that grudge. For me, I find that confession

is good for my soul so I will take the time to tell the person who hurt me that I felt hurt and that I let it grow. I tell them I want to start fresh and clear the air between us. If that person is open to hearing me out, then I will feel better. If that person asks for my forgiveness I know I can give it. If that person does not ask for forgiveness I know I have forgiven them and tried to make things right between us.

“I do feel like God is the one who extends forgiveness to me, like when I hold the grudge. And in the same way, I now know how to forgive the person who hurt me because God has shown me that grace. Part of that means I also learn to stand up for my feelings when I am hurt whether the other person knows it or not. It can become a teachable moment and the honesty shared often deepens the relationship.

“I do find that the more I forgive others and seek forgiveness from others the better I am at leading a balanced life. The less baggage I carry and the more joy I experience in living.” That was my email response.

After I wrote that email I also remembered the first thing I had to do after I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. I needed to go to someone I had hurt and seek their forgiveness. Ordination does not give a free pass when it comes to seeking forgiveness and saying, “I’m sorry.” We are all in this together.

So how does one go about this work of forgiveness and reconciliation? Our Scriptures for today can help us with this work and it is work. The Psalmist teaches us to continually praise God and to seek the Lord, to cry out to the Lord to be saved from every trouble.<sup>1</sup> The author of Ephesians writes to speak the truth to our neighbors, to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving, and live in love. These words encourage our words and actions to be like those of God in Christ.

When this epistle was written other ethical morality literature was also available—in China, India, and across the Greco-Roman world.<sup>2</sup> But what is unique to Christianity in the moral exhortations to create a society of good ethics was the *humility* that would be required to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving. These were traits that would not stem from great ethics unless great theology accompanied them. The ethics of humility are first demonstrated by God in the garden with the first human beings and again by God in Christ on the cross for all humanity.

The Sacraments teach us as well as the Word. In baptism we die to our self-centeredness, our pride, our sinful ways and share in Christ’s death which cleanses us. But baptism does not only cleanse, it also gives life, so that we put on the new life in Christ who rose from the dead for us. When we come to the table, the same death and resurrection is remembered and celebrated by the power of Christ being present with us in the Holy Spirit. The Psalmist tells us, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.”<sup>3</sup>

We take refuge in God as we worship together as the body of Christ. Worship helps us in this work of forgiveness. Every Sunday we are reminded of our baptism in the Prayer

of Confession and the Declaration of Forgiveness—we do this to seek forgiveness from God as a church community. God forgives us in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the eternal Good News of forgiveness. Over and over again we need to be forgiven because we are human beings, imperfect in our relationships with God and one another. We do this every week because confessing our wrongs and seeking forgiveness takes practice. God knows we always need it.

While we have been dwelling in the letter to the church at Ephesus for the past weeks, we have heard about the theme of unity that runs through this letter. The pronouns used in this letter are plural, the collective “y’all”—the exhortations about *what not to do* are addressed to the church, just as the encouragements about *how to live* are directed to the church.

Years ago gossip was a huge problem both inside and outside of the church. The modern day forms of that verse “Let no evil talk come out of y’all’s mouths” can best be described by how the King James Version includes the words “corrupt communication.” I have known more than one congregation to fall into the sin of gossip by emails, Facebook, and other corrupt communications. Better is the church that uses “words to give grace to those who hear.”<sup>4</sup>

“I’m sorry.”

Along with “Please” and “Thank you” these words “I’m sorry” are some of the most important words that a parent can teach a child.

Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu have written a book together titled *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. It is one of the best and most thorough books on how to forgive. When someone experiences a harm, hurt or loss, a choice is then made to hurt or to heal. The Tutus describe the choice of seeking revenge which leads to a cycle of deepening suffering or the choice of the path of forgiveness which produces healing and freedom.

The first step on the path of forgiveness is **Telling the Story**—this is the need to “admit being wounded”<sup>5</sup> and giving voice to the truth about what happened. The one who has hurt the other also has a story to share. This sharing of each person’s story is important for respecting the common bond of humanity. Each person has worth. Whom to tell, and when to tell are also discussed in the book with attention to a variety of stories with varying degrees of pain and sorrow. We find in Ephesians that letting one’s anger live through the night makes room for the devil. Tutus would affirm that and also acknowledge that it may not always be possible.

**Naming the Hurt** is the second stepping stone on the path to forgiveness. Unless the pain is faced, the hurt will remain and anger will take root and grow. The more the hurt is acknowledged, the stronger the healing that can take place. The one who hurt the other may or may not also suffer as a result of going through this process. Each person may be in different stages of the process.

In cases where a crime is the hurt like a family member is killed such as we learned in the Charleston nine, or in South Africa during apartheid, it may take days or weeks or months before an opportunity occurs to move to the third stepping stone—**Granting Forgiveness**. This step is also a choice where one begins to move from victim to hero because of forgiveness and the other moves from one who abuses to one who is being restored. Together a new story is shared, our story. This picture of reconciliation does not always happen so neatly. Sometimes the story is written instead of spoken, sometimes it is told to a counselor or pastor or friend. Sometimes the opportunity for granting forgiveness does not happen until much time has passed and people become ill or close to death.

Step four is **Renewing or Releasing the Relationship**. Here again the severity of the offense may help indicate whether the two persons can be reunited in whatever their previous relationship was—friendship or marriage or simply as two persons who may never see each other again, thereby being released.

That's a nutshell on how the Rev. Desmond Tutu and Rev. Mpho Tutu describe the process of forgiving. They include references to Scripture and how Old Testament persons and how Jesus modeled forgiveness.

Ultimately as disciples we are to learn from Jesus. To be a disciple is to follow in the ways of one's mentor. So we are to be imitators of God in Christ, forgiving others as God has forgiven us.

What I find fascinating about forgive in the Bible is this. In Hebrew and Greek each there are four different words that can be translated as forgive. Some mean "to release" or "let go" as in a divorce, or "to relinquish" or "discharge" as in canceling a debt, or "removing a burden," or "to cover" or "wash off" or "cleanse."

But the word used here in Ephesians tells us about God's disposition or *how the forgiving is offered*. ***Charizomai*** means that God "forgives freely, generously, and graciously."<sup>6</sup> My friends, let us be like God when we say, "I forgive you." And when we say, "I'm sorry."

<sup>1</sup> See Psalm 34: 1, 4, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore O. Wedel, "Exposition" of "The Epistle to the Ephesians" in *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume X* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 701-702.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 34:8a.

<sup>4</sup> See Ephesians 4:29.

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving~The Fourfold Path of Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 50.

<sup>6</sup> "Forgiveness" in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible D-H, volume 2* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), ed., Katherine Doob Sakenfield, 482.