

“Forgive One Another”

When I was growing up it seemed a near constant experience that when I would make a mistake or hurt someone's feelings my mother or father, or teacher would command me. “Say You're sorry.” So I learned to say I'm sorry, to apologize for any mistake.

I imagine many of you had that lesson drilled into you as well, when you were children. But somehow missing in that experience was the lesson that “I forgive you” should follow as readily as saying “I'm sorry.” Was that the same experience you had? Or did people teach you the importance of forgiveness as well as a child?

This struck me when I was becoming a parent, not too long ago. My wife Jackie and I now have two daughters. Our three year old is named Eva Jane. She has bright blonde hair, and beautiful blue eyes, and is very talkative. She loves meeting new people and making new friends. Her favorite princess is Cinderella. Annalise is two and a half. She has beautiful brown hair, and hazel eyes, a color she doesn't understand yet, but her eyes are even more enchanting than her sisters, and they often have that little glint in them that tells you she has mischief in her young mind. She is devoted to a few friends, and often wants to communicate more than her vocabulary allows, which makes for some interesting sentences. Her favorite princess is Snow White, which Eva Jane decided for her before she could speak, but she has accepted her sister's wishes as her own.

Being close in age, just fifteen months apart, as you can well imagine, our girls love to play together, and they often hurt one another's feelings inadvertently, when they play. They are each other's best friends, and no one can anger them more than they do each other. From early on, Jackie and I discussed how we thought it important to teach our daughters forgiveness, as well as apologizing, so when Eva Jane and Annalise hurt one another, we say “tell your sister you're sorry.” and quickly thereafter, “tell your sister 'I forgive you.'”

At this point in their lives, we are teaching them that they have a duty to forgive one another just as they have a duty to apologize whenever they hurt each other. This is the same motivation that Peter has when he asks Jesus about forgiveness in our gospel passage.

He asks “how often SHOULD I forgive.” but Jesus redirects him to a much greater motivation. Peter probably thinks he is being generous, because his offering to forgive “as many as seven times” Goes beyond the three times required by the teachers of the law in ancient Israel. But Jesus challenges him to go beyond keeping track of forgiveness out of a

sense of duty. Using the number seventy-seven or perhaps seventy times seven, as a way of emphasizing the difference between limitless forgiveness based in gratitude for being forgiven, and a limited forgiveness based in duty.

Jesus emphasizes this lesson with a story, that makes the numbers so much greater. When the King forgives the slave a debt of ten thousands talents, that number exceeded the entire revenue of King Herod's treasury for ten years. That number is truly an astronomical figure for a person of the time.

The slave, being forgiven sees a fellow slave who owes him the equivalent of about three months wages. Still a good amount of money, but nothing compared to the debt that had been forgiven him. Duty could have compelled the first slave to forgive his fellow. But instead he throws his fellow slave in prison. He definitely does not seem to be grateful for the amazing debt he was forgiven by the King. And on hearing about the scandal, the King responds with anger, that his gift was not received with gratitude. So he punishes the ungrateful slave. Jesus finishes the story by warning that we will also be punished if we do not forgive our brother or sister from our heart. So it seems to me that we have a choice, to respond in fear, or to respond out of gratitude.

Proverbs says "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." But our lessons today teach us that gratitude for our forgiveness is a better motivation than fear, or duty for offering our forgiveness to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In part, the difference between forgiveness out of duty or fear and forgiveness out of gratitude is that duty forgiveness is reactive as in, when my brother sins against me how often should I forgive him. Which requires that the brother want forgiveness first. but gratitude forgiveness is proactive. Going beyond forgiving just when asked to forgive, to forgiving when forgiveness is not even requested. This forgiveness moves to the level of love, which God has for us.

As Paul says in Romans 5: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Later in Romans, in the passage we read today, Paul gives us examples of how that loving, proactive, forgiveness based in gratitude can be expressed by us for one another. The question of eating or abstaining, was a serious question involving a practice of living that to some was seen as sinful, but not by others. Paul is talking about people who eat meat offered to idols. Much of the meat that was consumed, was slaughtered in the process of pagan sacrifice. And many faithful Christians would not eat of it, so as to avoid participating in the worship of idols. Others ate it, not considering the eating a sinful act. Paul is exhorting the Romans, "Those who eat, must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat."

It strikes me that while the issues have changed, basic aspects of how we in the Christian community are challenged to treat one another has stayed the same through thousands of years. Our church has been struggling with these issues, issues of how we live, whether our lifestyles are sinful or not, whether we regard one another as worthy of our relationships.

Ascension, the church I come from Good Shepherd in Florida, which also struggled recently through a church split over the controversial issues the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion, all struggle with issues that as they relate to how we treat each other in our community, are no different from those Paul wrote about to the Romans, two thousand years ago.

We would do well to heed what Paul says, rather than trying to push one another to conform to one opinion or way of being. "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds." Let all we do be done in honor of the Lord, and regard one another, as living their life in honor of the Lord. This involves a gratitude for what Christ has done for us, which results in our forgiving one another for our differences, and the ways we hurt and offend each other, even when that forgiveness is not asked for.

It involves a trust, that while we live or die, we are the Lord's, our lives are hidden in Christ. If Jesus is truly our Lord, then his death for us, can be the measure of our offering forgiveness to one another. Surely in most cases we are not required to lose our very lives, in order to forgive our brothers and sisters. But if we want to be a community of Love, to participate in the Love God has for us, we will forgive one another out of gratitude for how we have been forgiven.

When my daughters hurt each other. It is fascinating to me, that when one say "I'm sorry." Not a whole lot changes in the conflict. But when the hurt one says "I forgive you." usually they hug one another and go on playing, as if nothing had happened the forgiveness bringing true reconciliation in their relationship. How did we miss this growing up? How did we miss the notion, that forgiveness is even more important to mending a relationship than apologizing?

The lessons today call us to forgiveness out of gratitude for what God has done for us - so when you think about those who have gone, forgive them out of gratitude to God, when you encounter those who are still here, but have serious differences of opinion on how to live a life faithful to God, forgive them those differences. Hug one another, and go on playing, as if nothing had happened.

The forgiveness bringing true reconciliation in all of your relationships.

Amen.