

Forgiven and Forgiving

Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Ephesians 4:30-5:2

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November 17, 2013

In many settings, when we say the Lord's Prayer together there is an awkward pause following the words "Forgive us our..." What will it be? Trespasses? Debts? You listen for what the worship leader will say. A few years ago some people began to promote an ecumenical alternative, a prayer Catholics and Protestants of all stripes could say together: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." That's the one we use, of course, at Harbor Church. I'm not sure if we started doing that because it was ecumenical or because it seemed like a simpler, clearer word.

And yet, something is lost. Saying "sins" removes the matter to a religious realm. We think of sin as something we do against God, not something people do to us. But we know what it means to trespass on someone's property. We know what it means to owe someone money. Those are human things. God, forgive us when we violate boundaries you have set, as we forgive people who violate our boundaries. Forgive us when we disrespect you, as we forgive people who disrespect us. Do not hold against us how much we owe you—for we owe you everything—and help us to let go of our claims on people who owe us.

I've been reading this week a novel called *Home*, by Christian writer and Pulitzer Prize-winner Marilynne Robinson. Reverend Robert Boughton is an elderly Presbyterian minister in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, in the 1950's, and the novel is largely the story of his relationship with his prodigal son who comes home after twenty years. But there is a side story near the beginning about a neighbor, an agnostic the Boughton kids call Mt. Trotsky. The pastor's house sits on quite a large piece of land which he inherited. But Mr. Trotsky, who thinks that priests are parasites who rob from the poor, starts to grow alfalfa on part of the pastor's property. Each spring he appears in a borrowed tractor and sits with his back straight and his shoulders high, ready to be challenged. He was letting the pastor and the whole town know that he was engaged in trespass. The novelist says, "This is the very act against which Christians leveraged the fate of their own souls, since they were, if they listened to their own prayers, obliged to forgive those who trespassed against them" [p. 10]. The next year Mr. Trotsky planted potatoes and squash, corn the year after that. Then he brought a cousin in and built a house for him and his wife. "The Boughtons tacitly ceded all claim."

The pastor in the novel is willing to do all kinds of things to be true to his faith, but isn't this what most of us fear? If we give an inch, they'll take a mile? Forgiving a small thing opens the door to a big thing. Isn't it better to defend your rights? And yet, Jesus tells us to forgive. And Jesus models forgiveness for us.

In Robinson's novel, the pastor's daughter is thinking about her father's relationship with his estranged son Jack, who stopped coming to church and eventually left home altogether. She remembers: "There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, so Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding. Her father had said this more than once, in sermons, with appropriate texts, but the real text was Jack...If you forgive, he would say, you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace" [p.45].

The posture of grace. I like that. I think that's what Jesus is after when he commands us to forgive. He follows up the Lord's Prayer with the warning that if we do not forgive, our Father in heaven will not forgive us. He cannot mean that God's freedom to forgive is constrained by something we do or refuse to do. But he does seem to mean that there is a connection between our ability to receive forgiveness from God and our ability to forgive others. If we cannot forgive someone who has hurt us, it probably means that we have never really seen ourselves as someone who has hurt God and been loved nonetheless. It's not like a deal we make: OK God, I'll forgive John so that then you will forgive me. It's more that if we are not acutely aware that we live in a state of grace we will not likely assume a posture of grace, seeking to understand those who injure us.

Some scholars [e.g. J. Jeremias, A. Hultgren] have suggested that Jesus' language in the Lord's Prayer means something like "Forgive us, as we herewith forgive those who owe us." Simultaneously as we ask God for forgiveness, we announce that we are forgiving all those within the sound of our voices. I think that when we say the Lord's Prayer we usually lose sight of the "us-ness" of the prayer. This is not an individual praying; it is a community at prayer. Give us this day. Deliver us. It's not "Forgive me as I forgive others, but forgive us as we forgive others." Or, we could say, as we forgive one another. Jesus' original disciples could not have stayed together on the road if they had not learned to forgive one another. This is the way to be a community, the way to live together: recognizing that you are in constant need of God's forgiveness, and recognizing that God constantly forgives you, keep constantly forgiving each other. That's what Paul was telling the Christian community in Ephesus: "Put away bitterness and wrath and anger, and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

You can't have church without forgiveness. The community will split and splinter, or there will be walls of ice set up between the pews that are impenetrable by God's Spirit. I remember Henry Blackaby telling a story about preaching a revival at a church in Saskatchewan which was really stuck in the doldrums—like a lot of churches around here. There was no fire and no growth. Then Henry issued a call for the church members to forgive one

another and to repent of bitterness. As they sang a hymn, two brothers that had not spoken to each other for many years walked down two different aisles and met at the altar. When they saw each other, they broke down in tears and embraced. As Henry tells it, revival and growth and church health in that congregation can be dated from that moment. It was people that had not repented of their anger and their desire for revenge that was holding back the whole church. It was broken relationships that had broken the church.

How can we hold onto these grudges and keep on condemning each other when we know that we ourselves deserve condemnation? The most unforgiving person is the one who does not acknowledge his own sin. As one scholar [D. A. Carson] commented on the Lord's Prayer, a person's "unforgiving spirit bears strong witness to the fact that he has never repented." You can't be a follower of Jesus without the honest admission that you have sinned against God, that you have hurt and offended God and cut yourself off from his friendship. If you start there and begin to see that in spite of all you have done, God has reached out to you and absorbed all the pain of your offense into himself, even at the price of death, then you understand that you have received amazing grace. "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!" If we ever forget how precious it is, if we forget that we did not get here on our own but were lifted up by God's mercy out of the pit, then we lose the ability to forgive. We lose the posture of grace.

We all have people who hurt us, I guess. Maybe you don't. I was in the ministry about 25 years before I ever had to deal with people that just flat didn't like me. Sure, there were people who disagreed with me, and there were occasional brief conflicts, but until I was in my fifties I never had a feeling that some people were just against me and out to hurt me. It was then that I began to understand forgiveness. The French philosopher Derrida said that true forgiveness only occurs when one forgives that which is unforgivable. Anything less than that is a kind of social transaction, a kind of scratching the other's back as the other scratches yours. But there are times when people are downright mean. When people are mean to you, Christians live out of the reflex of forgiveness rather than the reflex of revenge.

Why? Not just because Jesus commands it, but because we have been forgiven much. In Matthew 18, Jesus picks up the language of forgiving debts to tell a story about forgiveness. You probably remember it: The servant of a rich man owes his master, somehow, about a million bucks. He pleads for more time to pay it back, and to his surprise, the master, knowing that the servant can never pay back what he owes, forgives the whole debt. As he goes on his way rejoicing, the servant runs into another employee who owes him twenty dollars. He demands immediate payment and threatens to strangle him. Other employees report this to the master. He calls the first servant to his office and asks him, "Since I forgave you so much, why did you not forgive something so small?" His judgment was to revoke his forgiveness of the million bucks. Jesus ends the story with a scary line: "This is how your Father in heaven will treat you if you do not forgive your brother from the heart."

I guess I'm not sure if I believe that God can or will revoke his mercy. It is, as some have said, his nature. But I think it is absurd that anyone can be forgiven so much by God and refuse to forgive a small offense by a fellow believer. Maybe not just absurd; impossible. If you don't forgive, you must never have understood at your core how much you have been forgiven.

It's been seven years since we all saw acted out a model of Christian forgiveness when the shootings occurred at the Nickel Mines school in Amish country. An evangelical pastor told CNN that he heard an Amish grandfather, standing beside the embalmed body of his 13-year-old granddaughter, tell a group of boys, "We must not think evil of this man." Another minister who was the spokesman for the family of Carl Roberts, the shooter who then shot himself, said that he was at the home of the shooter's father when an Amish neighbor visited. "He stood there for an hour, and he held that man in his arms, and he said 'We will forgive you.'" When the funeral was held for Carl Roberts, about half of the 75 people who attended were Amish neighbors. When three million dollars was raised nationwide for their community, they asked that it be shared with Roberts' wife and family.

There were 2,400 news stories written about these events within the first week after the shootings. The majority of them after the first day picked up the theme of forgiveness. But many of them looked at it as a miraculous event. Or they saw the Amish as the last remnant of what America used to be. The truth is that this was a habit of forgiveness so basic to their community that it was completely instinctual. A professor at Messiah College who is an expert on the Amish [David Weaver-Zercher] reminded people that the Amish are not "quaint leftovers"—they are a community of people who "refuse to dismiss Jesus' words about forgiveness as an unrealistic ideal." The Amish can be very strict, as you sometimes see on TV or in the movies. When members violate the community rules, they have to confess and repent, and they may have a period of separation from the community. But when they come back, the sin is never spoken of again, and every member of the community is compelled to forgive the offender. It becomes a habit to forgive an offense, even an "unforgivable" one like the murder of your children. It requires a habit of repenting of your desire for revenge, putting away, as Ephesians says, bitterness and wrath and anger and malice. It is a choice to be tenderhearted toward sinners just as God in Christ is tenderhearted toward us.

Are we even trying to develop that habit? Or do we have the habit of defending our sense of dignity? Is our self-esteem so fragile that it cannot be challenged? Or is our self-esteem built on the foundation of knowing that God loves us despite what we have done to dishonor him?

In the Nickel Mines tragedy, the Amish showed a real desire to understand Carl Roberts, the shooter. Even when they learned that his original plan was to tie up the girls and rape them, they still tried to understand his "heart trouble," as they put it. If you choose not to forgive, as Marilynne Robinson said, you put up a barrier to

understanding. If you label someone your enemy—as we labeled Al Qaeda and radical Muslims after 9/11—you cannot understand them. If you forgive the people who hate you—if you refuse to give in to your natural appetite for revenge—then you can begin to see them as human, as people loved by God, who have been conquered by anger. Then you can ask what made them so angry and begin to understand.

I came across a letter written by a Christian woman who goes by the name Tamara to a man who date-raped her several years before. If she can forgive...well, just listen to an excerpt [\[www.tamaraoutloud.com\]](http://www.tamaraoutloud.com):

I do not give you friendship; I will not invite you to dinner. Never may you ever be graced to know my children. I could not bear any of that. And the forgiveness I give you is not a pass. You were wrong, and you will always have been wrong. It is deeply and truly not okay.

But I give you, my rapist, a forgiveness that sees more.

Yes, you are my rapist. But not a monster; fully human. And you are my fellow traveler on a twisting, bumpy road. I have not taken the same wrong turns, but I have taken wrong turns all the same. And though I have not yet the strength to extend you my hand on the journey, I will humbly offer my map.

Because you are my rapist, but also my fellow traveler, and I do not wish you lost.

The map I will share is creased with compassion and worn with mercy and inked in indelible grace. I trust just enough to failingly follow it because I know no other Way. And though I cannot just now have you at my table, I pray you'll one day join me at His.