

Sunday, 20 November 2016

[Christian Caregiving 7- helping someone forgive](#)

[Gen 44:18-45:9; Psalm 32; 1 John 1:5-2:6; Luke 15:11-32](#)

We are continuing with our sermon series today, which we have called Christian Caregiving. This is actually the last in the series because next week is the beginning of Advent. This week we are dealing with caring for someone who wants to forgive someone. We have dealt with caring for someone who sins and we spoke about how to help them confess and then to speak God's forgiveness as a representative of Christ. This is a bit different. This week we are speaking about you, as a Christian caregiver, helping someone who has been hurt by someone else.

Forgiveness is a persistent theme throughout Scripture. Within the pages of the Bible we meet a God who takes sin incredibly seriously, but who is also very willing to forgive his people when they honestly repent and humbly seek forgiveness. When we get to the New Testament there is an emphasis, not only on God's forgiveness of us, but our need to forgive one another. Jesus says that if someone is repentant, that we should never draw a line as to when we stop forgiving someone even if they sin against us over and over (Lk 17:3-4). When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray he relates God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others as if they are two sides to the same coin- "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Lk 11:4). (I'm not always sure I want God to forgive me the way I forgive others- Frankly, I'd prefer Him to

do it much better towards me than I do to others). In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) we often emphasize the Father's incredible forgiveness of the lost son, but we often don't see that the older brother's un-forgiveness of his brother leaves him outside his father's house (which have actually been more to Jesus' the main point when speaking to the Pharisees).

Jesus tells an important parable about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35:

“21 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. 23 Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.”

A talent was the largest monetary unit of the time. One talent was worth more than 15 year's wages of a laborer. To owe ten thousand talents is to owe a debt that is impossible to pay back. The modern equivalent would be billions of dollars.

“25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii...”

One denarii was equal to a day's wage for a laborer. So he owed

him something like 1/3 of a year's wages. It's not a small debt, but it's not an impossible debt. It is thousands of dollars, but not billions of dollars. It took 6000 denarii to equal one talent which gives you a little bit of a sense of the difference between the debts. This servant owed 100 denarii, compared to the previous servant's 10,000 talents.

“... and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

The lesson here is that God has forgiven us much much more than we will even be asked to forgive someone else. If God offers us forgiveness of our great offence against him then how dare we withhold forgiveness of someone who has offended us in a smaller way.

There are plenty more examples we could give. Jesus declared at the Last Supper that the cup is for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28) and he cried out for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him saying they didn't know what they were doing (Lk 23:34). Forgiveness was an important part of the Gospel

Jesus' followers were trying to spread. We are inheritors of that Gospel and so we are also ambassadors of that that message. Forgiveness should be our specialty- not only helping people accept God's forgiveness, but also helping them through forgiving someone who has hurt them. It is especially important because God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are related. It's almost as if our unwillingness to forgive others shows that we haven't really accepted God's forgiveness.

So say someone comes to you and they say that someone has done something to them and they are having a hard time letting it go. How can you help them?

First it is important that, as Christians, we invoke Christ to help in this whole process. It is through him that we gain the power to forgive. If the person is a Christian, it's also important to ask yourself if this person has experienced the forgiveness of God in their life in a real and practical way. It doesn't mean you bring this up in your conversation with them, but you should have this sitting somewhere in your mind as you are talking to them.

It's also important for us to honestly recognize that anger and outrage at someone hurting someone else (or us) is natural. It is an internal alarm for justice. We want to be careful what we do with that anger, but it is important to just recognize it as a natural alarm when we encounter perceived injustice. It would be a scary world if we didn't have that alarm inside us.

Maybe we should also say a word about what not to do. We shouldn't just quote Scripture to the person and tell them they

have to forgive. Forgiveness isn't an on/off switch in the soul. It is a process. It is an even more involved process if it is a long-standing hurt from years ago and anger and bitterness is now attached to it. Forgiveness is a process and it can take time to truly forgive.

So where do we begin? We begin by affirming and showing compassion to the person who has been wounded. We listen to them deeply. We hear their story. We need to acknowledge their pain. Sometimes it can be hard to let go because they don't feel like anyone really understands why this was hurtful. They, in their pain, need to be deeply heard and accepted.

We want to be careful that we don't go through that part too quickly. We want to really take time to hear their pain. Otherwise their forgiveness will be superficial and might even become a kind of denial. As good Christians they know they should forgive, but without going through the process they might put on a show of forgiveness (they might even convince themselves it's genuine). They might be left feeling guilty because the thoughts about what this person has done to them still haunts them continuously, and they might feel like they can't talk about it because they have supposedly forgiven them. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say that forgiving too soon is "cheap grace". We don't want to withhold our forgiveness, but we also don't want to forgive without being ready.

Sometimes we have this image of forgiveness that tells us that forgiveness means saying what happened wasn't really so bad after all, which isn't true. Martin Luther King Jr. once said,

“forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship.”

We need to recognize what has been done as being wrong, and as being hurtful. Forgiveness is not forgetting, and it is not about saying it’s not really that bad.

We should also not make forgiveness equal to reconciliation. Forgiveness is our part. We can do forgiveness apart from the person who has hurt us. Reconciliation is a restoration of the relationship. Reconciliation requires both people- the person who has been hurt and the offender. Reconciliation won’t happen if one party is unwilling. It might also be unwise in some abusive relationships to pursue reconciliation. Or the other person might have died or they might have lost contact. So reconciliation doesn’t always happen, but forgiveness can happen apart from reconciliation. That means we also don’t need someone to confess their fault to us for us to forgive. That is part of reconciliation, but not forgiveness.

Once the person has been able to honestly share their story and their pain, then they can talk about the anger and resentment towards the offender. ...I remember someone telling me a story about how their forgiveness process worked. They said in prayer it was as if they stood before God as a judge. The person who hurt them deeply was imprisoned in the courtroom and they told God everything this person did to them. As they spoke they saw the compassion in God’s eyes, but they also saw outrage in His eyes towards the attacker. When they spoke everything they left the courtroom so God could deal with the person. They gave God their desire for vengeance.

Another example is from a Palestinian man I met once. He was working for a moving company we hired to help us move back to Alberta from Toronto. When he asked what kind of building I was moving out of I told him it was a seminary where they train priests and theologians. They he replied, “I am from Bethlehem! Do you believe in Bethlehem!?!” He told me about some of his painful experiences as a Palestinian Christian in Israel and in more colourful language than I will use here he said, “When Jesus comes back it is going to hit the fan!” He gave the judgement to Jesus. Rather than strapping a bomb to himself, he gave the judgment and vengeance to God.

That act takes a lot of faith because we have to believe that God will do what is just- that God will take justice seriously- that God will take our pain seriously. We have to believe that God loves us deeply and cares deeply about what has happened to us. Only when we believe that will we be able to hand over our anger and revenge.

When we decide to do that, then we are able to forgive. It has to be a decision. It probably has to be a spoken decision, even if we are all alone.

That act of forgiveness doesn't mean the pain and other consequences automatically go away. You still need healing from your wounds. ... To give a silly example- Say you step on my toe. You feel bad and say you're sorry. I forgive you, but my toe still hurts. I might not want revenge, but my toe still hurts even if I have genuinely forgiven you. ... Healing can take time. And we might have to speak our forgiveness over and over as

we let go of layers of anger and resentment.

We might think forgiveness is a difficult thing for God to ask of us, but we should also consider how it goes for those who don't forgive and are filled with bitterness and anger. God specializes in bringing beauty out of human darkness and pain. Human beings caused the cross and God brought forgiveness and resurrection out of it. When we open ourselves to forgiveness we could be making space for God to do something beautiful. We saw amazing powers of forgiveness coming from The Rev. Dale Lang when his son was shot in a school in Taber. Or The Rev. Martin Hattersley when he forgave his daughter's murderer and even sat with the offender during his trial in Edmonton. We saw this in the example of an Amish community in Pennsylvania when a gunman killed 8 preteen girls in their school (see the movie "Amish Grace"). We see this in the life of Desmond Tutu after experiencing the horrors of Apartheid. There is tremendous power and healing available through forgiveness. As disciples of Christ we are ambassadors spreading the gospel of forgiveness.
AMEN

(If you would like to learn more on this see "Don't Forgive Too Soon by Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn)