

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
26 February 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Forgiveness: Now, Again, and Always”

First in the Lenten Series, *Courage & Kin-dom* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 18:15-35

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Welcome to Lent, a season that leads us to life, but not without dealing with death first.

Lent begins with a reminder of *our* mortality on Ash Wednesday – “*from dust we were created and to dust we shall return,*” (Genesis 3:18) – and it culminates with the reality of *Jesus*’ mortality as he is crucified on Good Friday. The silence of Holy Saturday serves as a buffer between the heaviness of Good Friday and the levity of Easter Sunday. There is a rising that will come, there is hope that will transform – but like Jesus, before we rise, we fall. It is in the falling that we are humbled. It is in the falling that we must seek another’s help to get up. It is in the falling that we learn we cannot do everything on our own, nor are we created to or called to.

Independent though we long to be, we *need* one another. Which is what today’s text is all about.

To be human is to make mistakes and break relationship. To be “kin” in the kin-dom of God is to be in relationship, in community, with one another. Forgiveness is the bridge between those oft distant realities. It is essential.

Forgiveness is not optional – especially in community, and definitely in the kin-dom of God. There is not a family of God without the practice of forgiveness. And, it is a practice, even perhaps, before it is a change of heart.

On that note, I invite you to be curious with me about this today: maybe we’ve been thinking too hard about forgiveness for far too long...wrestling with *our* ability to forgive or our desire to forgive – instead of just forgiving, because forgiving is clearly the Way of Jesus, the Way of the Kin-dom, the Way of God’s heart. It’s not about whether we *want* to forgive or

not, it's about the fact that God wants us to, and that God forgives us.

Throughout Lent we'll read stories and parables from Jesus that emphasize justice and mercy and an honest examination of our own prejudices, biases, and ways of seeing. These scriptures will challenge us to view curiosity as an essential practice for growing in us the courage we need to bring about "the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven." Hence our theme for Lent: Courage & Kin-dom.

First a word about courage. Social scientist and research Brené Brown reminds us, "The root of the word courage is *cor* – the Latin word for *heart*. In its earliest forms...courage originally meant 'To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.'"¹ "Over time, this definition has changed, and today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad)

is the definition of courage. [Aside: this is what our congregational discernment process is about!] Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today's world that's pretty extraordinary."² And in gospel terms, the kin-dom doesn't call for heroes. We already have a Savior, we don't need to be saviors ourselves, we need to be support for one another.

Which leads us to the word Kin-dom. The kin-dom of God is first and foremost relational – we are spiritual kin, siblings in the Spirit, brothers and sisters in Christ. A family of God. A family of faith. To be kin requires that we care for one another. And caring for one another, takes heart. Which brings us full circle back to courage! Courage – the work of the heart – is what builds the kin-dom.

So it's fitting that we begin with Forgiveness. It is one of those qualities of the kin-dom of God that takes vulnerability and heart. To forgive is to recognize that someone else is human and makes mistakes. To allow

¹ Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*.

² Brown, *ibid*.

ourselves to be forgiven is to recognize that we are human and make mistakes. And our mistakes, no matter who we are, do not define us or destine us.

Lent is bookended with Forgiveness. We begin with this passage on forgiveness, and we'll end on Good Friday with Jesus' own words, as he says from the cross, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do,*" (Luke 23:34)

First, the passage today. Some key things to note. Matthew's Jesus takes great care to show us a practical model of how to handle a breached relationship. First, go directly to the person and try to work it out. Do not triangulate or talk to others. (I wonder how many issues in our lives would be solved if we would only do this first step! I think 9 times out of 10, this is effective!) Go directly to the person.

However, should that not work – Jesus gives next steps. If you must, involve a couple other people – mediators, pastors, therapists, good friends – people who can help ensure that you are hearing one another. If that does not work, then bring the matter before the "church," which in this case, most likely

means something akin to the spiritual leadership body of the church (rather than an entire congregation – so no worries you aren't airing your dirty laundry in front of everybody's mother, brother and second cousin twice removed!). This is a larger body of people who are trained spiritually to listen well, offer wisdom, and restore relationships.

Notice – that throughout this process – the focus is not on the one who has been harmed. The focus is actually on the one who committed the offense, giving them multiple chances to own up to what they have done and restore relationship. This is not to say that the one harmed should not be taken into consideration. Quite the opposite. A whole separate process must be going on for the person who has been harmed – a process of healing and listening and care. Jesus speaks to this many other times in his gospel. And of course, it needs to be said that in some cases the offense is so grave that is not safe or helpful for the one harmed to be involved, or the harm will continue. And that's okay. That is not what this passage is addressing. But here, in *this* passage, he is talking about what we do about the

person who has offended or caused the offense.

This is a great reminder of the need for restorative justice, rather than punitive measures or capital punishment. Studies show that we heal in community,³ not in isolation, and the gospel shows that too. No wonder this is *courageous* (heart-centered) work! It's easier to lock people away til death than it is to love them back to life. To believe the gospel is to believe every person is worthy of redemption and second chances. We are not defined by our behavior, but by our belovedness, even if our behavior is reprehensible.

As Christians, we are not to be so quick to focus on punishment or retribution, as much as restoration and second chances. This is our calling. And it is hard. No wonder we are calling this courageous work.

And. It's worth pointing out that the Scripture says that as a final resort, after three chances of restoration of right relationship, if the person who committed the fault or caused harm is not willing to make amends or

acknowledge their harm, then it is okay to say they cannot be part of the community until they can. Pastor Morgan always reminds me that to be *Open to All Closed to None* means all people are welcome, but not all behavior is welcome. There are boundaries that honor belovedness; it's never "anything goes."

And this is what Matthew's Jesus means when he says they will be to you as a "Gentile or tax collector." Matthew is talking to a Jewish community, where gentiles and tax collectors were excluded. However – to be excluded from the community does not mean being excluded from God's love. Quite the opposite. Who does Jesus spend his ministry connecting with?! Gentiles and tax collectors! And this passage follows the parable of the Lost Sheep, showing us that God pours out energy going after the one who is lost. So just because someone cannot be part of the community right now because of their behavior, does not mean that God is not still pursuing them nor does it mean that people within the community are to stop connecting with them outside of

³ For example, <https://www.sevenarrowsrecoveryarizona.com/stories/the-importance-of-community-in-the-healing-process> or <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/keeping-it->

real-and-resilient/202204/the-healing-power-of-community-and-connection or <https://sempersarah.com/healing-doesnt-happen-in-isolation/>.

community gatherings. God never gives up on us, we are not to give up on one another. Again, courage! It's much easier to write people off, which is kind of what Peter is thinking!

Like us, Peter wants a definite end to this process, he wants to know when he'll know this whole forgiveness ordeal is over or when he'll know he's "done enough"...when he can move on with his life. Is seven times enough times to forgive? And Jesus says not 7, but 77 or as some translations say, 70 x 7. Either way, it's hyperbole anyway. The point is clear – forgiveness is never ending; it is a continual process. Our call to forgive has no limit because God's grace has no limit. We never get to say "I do not forgive." At least not in the kingdom of God. Forgiveness is a foregone conclusion in the Kingdom. Again – this has me wondering if we think too hard about it...always asking ourselves IF we can forgive or what it would take for us to forgive. We get in our heads about it – rationalizing what is just or not...whether we can let someone off the hook or not (because often we think that's what forgiveness is, if we're honest!)

But Jesus doesn't ask us whether we *want* to forgive or if it feels good to forgive; he says, "forgive."

And this is what makes the parable that follows so interesting. Essentially, it shows us that if we struggle to forgive others – then that means we have not accepted the forgiveness of God for ourselves.

I'll say that again. Our ability to forgive others shows the extent to which we have actually accepted God's forgiveness of ourselves.

If we are to hear what Jesus is teaching us in this passage, it means that if you struggle to forgive someone else, then that is indicative that you still have work yet to do on truly accepting that God loves you without condition and forgives you wholly and completely as you are. It's really not about you and the other person at that point, it's about you and God.

I know. It would be easier perhaps to say, "well I can't forgive that person because what they did is so horrible or horrific and I just can't wrap my mind around it, nor can I let them off the hook...that's not

fair.” And, of course, in a way, holding on to that anger protects us. It keeps us from having to do the hard work of restoring relationship.

However, what it’s really revealing, according to Jesus, is that we have not yet accepted God’s forgiveness for ourselves...as we see in the parable. The slave who has a huge debt forgiven by the king, he doesn’t “get it” because doesn’t forgive a much smaller debt of somebody else. The lesson being: when we realize how we have been forgiven and how we are unconditionally loved – we can’t help but offer that same kind of love and openness and release of debt to others.

So, when we fail to forgive others, it’s because we are forgetting that *we* are human just as they are human. And in our humanness, we need grace, and we have already been given it by God – and everybody has been given it by God...so us extending forgiveness to another is not something that we have to decide to do or not decide to do. It has been decide. God forgives, and so do we. And that’s kind of freeing, isn’t it?

Because often when we talk about forgiveness we have these lofty discussions about it related to whether forgiveness is extended too quickly if it’s “cheap grace” or if it’s not extended in enough time, then the person must not have been to therapy enough to work through their pain. We stand in awe at public displays of forgiveness like the Amish who not only forgave someone who killed children in their community, but attended his burial and supported his widow and children.

We marvel at people who are able to forgive such egregious sins, even as we struggle to forgive our own friend or family member for the hurtful comment they said. We know that to forgive is not to forget...but just in case we might forget we hang on to those little resentments as they build and don’t even realize the harm they are causing ourselves as they build up over time.

We think about forgiveness as related to our own timeline of healing from the harm or coming to a place of wanting to extend grace to someone because we want to let go of our anger and we’ve made peace or *we* have healed.

But in this parable on forgiveness, the enormous debt is forgiven immediately (note: the indebted asks for patience, he asks for a second chance) and it is granted, immediately. Of course, just as quickly the same person does not forgive someone who owes him a much smaller debt. And then, of course, he ends up being punished – not for the debt he owes (he still has forgiveness for that) – but rather he is punished for not offering someone else the same thing he was offered himself...the implication is: forgiveness is immediate, even if the healing will take a lifetime.

And likewise, as Jesus is dying on the cross, the timeline for forgiveness is immediate. Forgiveness flows out of Jesus' heart seemingly as instantaneously as blood is flowing out of his body. "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do,*" he says to God about his torturers and murderers!

Think about it. This was not forgiveness after the fact, many days, months, or years later. It wasn't forgiveness after an apology was extended or wrongdoing admitted. This

wasn't forgiveness for the sake of mental health to help him release hatred so it wouldn't eat away at him the rest of his life – after all, the rest of his life was mere moments. Rather this is flat out forgiveness during the actual real time of the crime.

All of this makes me wonder - could what we see Jesus do on the cross and what we hear him teach in this parable mean that forgiveness is to be more of a spiritual reflex that reflects the immediate heart of God, rather than an emotional response that reflects our own change of heart that comes over time?

In other words, is forgiveness less about how *we feel* about someone...and more about how *God* feels about someone? And the courage – or heart work – needed is to trust God's heart and live from that place in these moments rather than from our own emotional heart space? (And this is coming from a heart-centered person!)

That's not to say we are not to come around to a more personal form of forgiveness in time...But it seems that Jesus is showing us that part of our public witness to the nature of God's grace and to the state of God's heart is to offer

forgiveness immediately...and not even to offer it ourselves but to pray for God's forgiveness as a way of reminding ourselves (and the world) that while we may be struggling with forgiveness – that struggle is over for God...it's already decided. God forgives. Everyone. No matter what.

And maybe the most practical takeaway from this possible interpretation of forgiveness is that it shows us that forgiveness does not mean automatic reconciliation. We don't see any kind of relationship of reconciliation between Jesus and his persecutors on the cross. In fact, they continue to torture him, casting lots for his clothing and mocking him. We do not see reconciliation here, but we do see a plea for forgiveness.

Maybe these are separate processes – forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as Jesus separates them out here in his teaching, the first part being about reconciliation and the second part about forgiveness. It's Peter's question that joins the two! But Jesus doesn't define a timeline for connecting the two. Rather we only know that restoration is in process for a while, while forgiveness is immediate.

If Jesus reflects the very embodied and incarnate heart of God for us, then indeed, we see forgiveness extended on the cross and in this parable, as a spiritual reflex that *speaks more to who God is* than an emotional response that shows who *we* are.

And. This is also true for us when we are on the receiving end of forgiveness, not just when we are doling it out. If you are sitting here today wondering if you are worthy of God's love – wondering if you are capable of being forgiven...hear this: Nothing you have done could ever make God stop loving you and nothing you could ever do will keep God from loving you in the future.

It's okay if you struggle to understand this; you probably never will. The question is: will you accept God's grace and forgiveness *even if* you do not understand it? Will you let yourself be loved as God loves you? You don't have to do anything to earn it; just break down walls around your heart and receive it.

This is the Good News we see exemplified in this parable and on the cross – forgiveness is for ALL. And it is Right Now.

Right Now. You don't do anything to earn it. You have it. And – the way you'll keep suffering is if you deny it to others or to yourself, because to deny it keeps us trapped in a game of “who deserves what” rather than finding freedom in the grace of God.

Forgiveness doesn't depend upon our knowledge or emotional readiness, it depends upon our acceptance of God's grace and love.

This is why forgiveness is a spiritual practice. We don't learn how to forgive once, and then just know how to do it. I think we just do it – and then come to learn what it means. And we lean into God's forgiveness of us, again and again and again. It's only in understanding and internalizing God's forgiveness of us, that we will be able to forgive others.

When something happens to us that hurts or offends us, we are to forgive now, today. And, if it happens again – we are to forgive, again. And if it keeps happening, we are to keep forgiving – always. Does that make sense? Nope, not at all. Is it what God asks us to do? Yep, it is.

Why would God ask us to do this? Because God knows that if we don't do this ourselves, we'll never understand the love with which God sees us.

God forgives us today. For whatever we've done. God will forgive us again and again and again – tomorrow and next week and next month. God forgives always. That is God's nature. God's heart. That is God's courageous act that inspires us to act in like manner. This is why it is called a spiritual practice. Practice. It takes practice.

This is how we are to love others. *This* is how we are to be kin in the kin-dom of God. The courageous, heart-centered work of building the Kin-dom begins with Forgiveness. Until we get this, and start living it, we'll be hard-pressed to do anything else. We are forgiven – first and last. We forgive others – today and always. In *this* case, maybe this isn't something we need to think about, but something we just need to accept, receive, and do. It won't ever make sense, but is forever our salvation – our long-lasting healing and wholeness. For us, and for the world.

Amen.