

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

December 11, 2016

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

Dear congregation,

Forgive is a big word. It's huge, even gigantic. Just seven letters but it's something that takes years to learn how to do well. And more than learning how to do it, it takes grace from God.

You see a lot of ugliness in life from an unwillingness to forgive. Many people can tell us stories of family feuds. Often money is at the center. We hear of problems starting between family members who fight over the estate money after parents die. Or family members in business together get jealous of one another, start fighting over money or control and before long they are no longer talking. It may even come to lawsuits against one another. A lack of trust and inability to forgive does huge damage. When we can't or won't forgive each other relationships are destroyed more and more as time passes.

Husbands and wives who won't forgive, find the marriage drifting apart more and more. They might live under the same roof but there is no love. There's hardly communication. And when they do communicate, it's usually more fuel on the fire. There's no good will between them. No willingness to give their spouse the benefit of the doubt. Words and actions are misunderstood and the meaning twisted. In most cases, the marriage eventually ends because none of us can live under such intense pressure for a long time.

People who won't forgive wrongs done in the workplace grow increasingly bitter. They resent the employee or employer who wronged them. And that grows into bitterness that clouds our vision so we can't be objective anymore. We see nothing but negative things in our workplace and eventually we either quit or get fired because our attitude is so toxic and our work quality suffers.

Is it any wonder that God tells his people to forgive one another. He loves us too much to want us to go down the destructive road of un-forgiveness. That's why he gives us a call to forgive.

It Takes Hard Work

The call to forgive is a call to hard work. If you think that's the approach for wimps who can't stand up for themselves or something like that, you're not alone. But you're also not right. Dr. Tom Wright says,

*Have you ever seriously tried to forgive someone who has wronged you? Have you ever seriously tried to be compassionate and patient? Have you ever tried to let **Christ's** peace, Christ's word, Christ's name be the reality around which you order your life? If you have, you'll know it's not easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort.*

That's true, isn't it? It's not easy to forgive someone who has wronged you. For simple wrongs, it might mean accepting someone's apology and then moving on. But even that is not easy for us.

We start to second guess people's motives. We wonder if they are really sincere. The next time we interact with them, they don't seem any different and certainly not any better. Our minds quickly think, "If she was really sorry when I forgave her last week, she would not have acted similarly today. She would have tried harder to keep her words in check." The list goes on. We can quickly second-guess the sincerity of others, which then gives us a sense of moral superiority. And that's just over small disputes we have.

It becomes all the harder when people hurt us deeply. We have sayings like "Once bitten, twice shy" meaning we won't give people a second chance very quickly if they hurt us once. We may give a different person a first chance but the person who hurt you will not easily get close to you again. We say, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me" meaning we are fools if we give someone a second chance.

All of this flies in the face of what Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer and what Paul says in Colossians 3.

Our Lord says we should pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." John Calvin writes,

In Matthew, sins are called debts, because they expose us to condemnation at the tribunal of God, and make us debtors; nay more, they alienate us entirely from God, so that there is no hope of obtaining peace and favour except by pardon.... And certainly, if the Spirit of God reigns in our hearts, every description of ill-will and revenge ought to be banished.

Still it is hard for us to let go of the sin that others commit against us. But it's wrong to read "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" as if that line speaks about a prerequisite to forgiveness or a condition that we must meet before we can be forgiven by God. You see, some people try to say that Jesus means we will only be forgiven to the degree that we forgive others. If that's the case, we might as well all prepare ourselves for eternity in a hot place. We can't measure up to that standard. No one can. Besides, we know from the Bible that salvation is by grace through faith not through our own achievements, like forgiving others. Jesus is not saying we have to prove ourselves worthy of forgiveness by forgiving others.

Instead, this is what we read, Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors means,

*Forgive us just as we are fully determined,
as evidence of your grace in us,
to forgive our neighbors.*

The words "fully determined" speak to our human will. If we're serious about forgiving people who hurt us, it'll take determination. And the bigger the offense against us, the harder it will be to forgive someone.

It's tough work. And that's especially true when everyone around you is saying, "Don't do it." Or "You're a fool to forgive that jerk!" Remember why Jesus says this to us. As Tom Wright put it,

Remind yourself that to be tenderhearted doesn't mean being sentimental. That being kind doesn't mean being a soft touch. That humility isn't the same thing as low self-esteem. That meekness is not weakness, but is what you get when a powerful wild horse has been tamed (all the same power, but now under control). That large-heartedness doesn't mean letting everyone do what they want with you. Don't let people scoff at the central virtues that make the Christian life what it's supposed to be. Why do you think people do that? Are they, perhaps, threatened by such a dazzling and demanding way of life? (182)

Yes, friends, Jesus wants our lives to reflect his love and to dazzle! In teaching us the Lord's Prayer he's teaching us to let our lives glorify God to make him look good in the world around us. That means striving to forgive others as freely and graciously as God in Christ has forgiven us. And that takes discipline and determination.

It Takes Grace

But more than human effort, it takes divine help. It takes God's grace. And the best way for me to help you see that, I think, is through a few examples.

You may have heard the well-known story about Corrie Ten Boom. "Arrested by the Nazis along with the rest of her family for hiding Jews in their Haarlem home during the Holocaust, she was imprisoned and eventually sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp along with her beloved sister, Betsie, who perished there just days before Corrie's own release on December 31, 1944.

Inspired by Betsie's example of selfless love and forgiveness amid extreme cruelty and persecution, Corrie established a post-war home for other camp survivors trying to recover from the horrors they had escaped. She went on to travel widely as a missionary, preaching God's forgiveness and the need for reconciliation. Corrie's devout moral principles were tested when she came face to face with one of her former tormentors in 1947.

After a speech she gave in a church in Germany,

A man came to her and said, "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk; I was a guard in there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fraulein*,..." his hand came out, ... "will you forgive me?"

And Corrie writes, "I stood there I whose sins had every day to be forgiven and could not. Betsie had died in that place could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.... And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my

whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.”

That, congregation, is grace. We cannot do such things without God's help. We can be thankful for our salvation which comes by grace alone. And still we need God's grace daily to live our life his way. And we need to pray for that, as Corrie did. Just as Christ, by grace, forgave us, so we with his grace can forgive others.

Austin and Jessica Crowley know about the need for grace in order to save their marriage. Listen and watch the testimony they give for their home church as they share their journey of brokenness, sin, rebellion, fumbling along and then grace and forgiveness.

There we have it again. More grace. Apart from God's grace to fix their marriage, forgiveness would not have been possible. Both Jessica and Austin had issues going into the marriage. And those issues only became bigger once the pressure grew in their lives. Both had wrong thinking and wrong actions. It's only when they got to the point of crying out to God, “I can't do this” that they found grace from Jesus.

Austin put it so beautifully when he talked about looking at the cross. He said, “Now I see Jesus on that cross and my sin putting him there... which was really hard to see that but it's amazing that I got to see it... that God showed me.” We need to look at the cross each day, especially when we feel wronged by someone. We can forgive others because Christ has forgiven us so much more. But we need to look to Jesus for grace to do that because we can't do it in and of ourselves.

Forgiveness is hard work. And while we need to seek it and give it, we need God's grace to humble us to the point that we realize we are nothing without Jesus and we'll fail without his help. As the Crowley's reminded us, we get so lost in ourselves and we're so helpless in ourselves. We hold on to anger and resentment. We allow brokenness to get worse and worse. Only Jesus can forgive us. And only he can give us the grace we need to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Gracious God in heaven, all we can say is “thank you!” We thank you for your amazing grace, your amazing love, your persistent work in drawing us to yourself despite our rebellious hearts. We pray that you will keep us humble and totally in love with you because of your love shown first of all to us. Forgive our stubbornness and pride and help us to forgive as we have been forgiven by you! We ask this in Jesus' precious and powerful name. Amen.