Forgiveness

Last week Bruce during communion and I during the sermon spoke on the need for repentance.

Flowing from our repentance is the forgiveness by God for our sins.

1 John 1:9

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

And another verse that ties in with what we said and with our recent talk about caring for creation.

2 Chronicles 7:14 (NRSV)

*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

But the forgiveness I want to speak of today is not about God forgiving us but our forgiveness of one another.

We have all been hurt by the actions and/or words of others, to various degrees of pain. Some deeply wounded in their childhood, teenaged years, or even more recently.

Jesus himself is aware of the wounds from people around him.

He was betrayed with a kiss by one of his followers, Judas Iscariot.

Yet on the cross, Luke 23:34 *Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

I acknowledge that what I am talking about today may bring some resistance in your hearts.

I acknowledge that forgiveness is a hard thing to do; some would even say it is an impossibility.

The usual response to an injustice done against us is to seek revenge.

Our most common response is that “I do not want to forgive that person, I do not want to let the person off the hook, I want my pound of flesh.”

The pound of flesh reference comes from Shylock in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice play. I want my pound of flesh – I want to get my revenge.

Other cultures, particularly Melanesian, refer to the concept of ‘payback’.

In the Old Testament we read of payback. An injustice done, vengeance wrought on the offenders and the offender’s tribe.

In Genesis 4:23 Lamech boasts to his wives *“I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold.”*

So, in a chapter of punishments for crimes comes the often quoted Exodus 21:24 *an eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*

This is often read as the right to vengeance whereas it is actually setting limits on the amount of retaliation. It actually means no more than an eye for an eye.

You may have heard the Maori word Utu which is commonly translated revenge but actually is a concept of reciprocation or balance. It means to restore the balance by exacting something from the offender.

Christianity however says nothing about authorizing vengeance and calls for the exact opposite. It calls for us to turn the other cheek, to give our coat when someone takes our shirt.

Matthew 5:38*“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

As Christians, we are to forego our right for vengeance and offer the white feather of peace. We are to give our right to vengeance to God and allow him to deal with it.

Romans 12: 17*Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

In other words, God calls for us to do the impossible. He calls for us to be countercultural and not to exact some sort of retribution on those who have hurt or harmed us.

Our reluctance to forgive is based on the false assumption that forgiving means giving in or giving up something valuable.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It has been said that unforgiveness is like drinking a cup of poison and hoping the other person will die.

Interestingly, it is when we forgive that we are truly God’s children. It says in Matthew 5:44-45

*44But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

The command to love one another becomes translated into an unlimited call for forgiveness. [[2]](#footnote-2)

It seems a tough call but there it is.

I want to show you a clip from the trial of the Green River mass murderer and the words of one of the parents to the killer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2_OOaP763>

It has been said that forgiveness is a sign of the genuineness of one's relationship to God[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thankfully it is not about us doing this forgiveness in our own strength. If it was in our own strength, it would not happen, could not happen. God gives us the supernatural help to allow us to forgive.

Forgiveness is part and parcel of how we are to walk as Christians, but we do not do this alone, the Holy Spirit empowers us to forgive. We need to start the process of forgiving others, and then the Holy Spirit will come alongside us in that act.

Jesus Christ and His comforting spirit -- the Holy Spirit -- are a powerful force for helping us to forgive.

A story from Corrie ten Boom, a concentration camp survivor:

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

A man came forward after the meeting. I remembered him. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. “You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “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. Fräulein”–again the hand came out – “will you forgive me?”

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my 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!”

Forgiveness does not just happen, in the way that a wound may heal itself (without our intervention). Forgiveness is an action of the will.[[4]](#footnote-4) We start the process and God does the rest.

When we do not forgive, it does not hurt the offender. They may have forgotten all about the offence given but our unwillingness to forgiveness actually turns the hurt to us, we internalize the hurt.

Could I suggest that there is someone else we need to forgive? That is us. We tend to hold ourselves to a higher standard than others around us and often we cannot forgive ourselves for our actions. Sometimes we ask God for forgiveness but then hold on to that hurt and do not release it. If God has been given it, let it go. Don’t take it back but leave it on the lap of God.

For the reasons I have already given and about to give, we need to forgive and release ourselves as well.

Let me give you 2 reasons why we should forgive:

1. The first is that God forgives us to the measure that we forgive others.

The Lord’s prayer asks God to forgive us as we forgive others…

And in Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

The reason for that command from Jesus is because a root of bitterness can grow up in us because of unforgiveness. This root can be buried deep inside our heart and can block the flow of God’s love from penetrating deep within our heart. It also blocks the flow of God through us, making it difficult for us to experience God’s love for others.

Colossians 3:13

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

1. The second reason is also a truth:

Unforgiveness is a major cause of depression, many people have unforgiveness but are not even aware of it because it is buried so deep inside. And it shapes their world view and their thought patterns and ultimately their actions.

People do and say things that hurt us very deeply. Sometimes we are hurt by the ones that are closest to us. Sometimes we are hurt in childhood, at the most vulnerable time of life, leaving wounds that we think are healed but they have left scars that still remind us of the wound. We all walk with a limp.

The concept of "hurt people hurt people" tells us that people who have experienced pain, trauma, or harm are more likely to inflict hurt others. This can appear in various ways, from physical violence to emotional or psychological harm. The hurt can also extend beyond direct interpersonal interactions to attitudes and actions that contribute to broader societal harm.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Forgiveness is not about forgetting, but making a decision that that wrong against us will not define us.

Forgiveness is not about pretending that it did not happen or did not hurt; nor is it about minimising it, or hiding it - but deciding that we will not remain stuck in a response of resentment and retaliation, however justified such an attitude may feel.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When we hear the responses to the media from family of victims murdered or killed as they come out of the courthouse after the offender was sentenced, and hear the lack of satisfaction at the sentencing. There is no sense of things being right. There is no forgiveness. They remain in their pain.

There is a harrowing movie called Dead Man Walking of a murderer/rapist on death row and the Catholic sister who became his spiritual mentor as he faced his death. It stars Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon. The victims' families do not understand the sister’s efforts to help the convict and claim that she is "taking his side". They demand "absolute justice" (i.e., his life for those of their children). But after the prisoner is executed, the murdered boy's father attends the funeral ceremony; although he is still filled with hate, he soon begins to pray with the sister.

If we say monsters are beyond forgiving, we give them a power they should never have. If they are unforgivable monsters, they are given power to keep their evil alive in the hearts of those who suffered most.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Lewis B. Smedes wrote, "When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumour out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself."

Let me show you another story

The Oklahoma City bombing was a domestic terrorist truck bombing of a Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, United States, on April 19, 1995, perpetrated by anti-government extremists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. The bombing killed 168 people, injured 680, and caused an estimated $652 million worth of damage. Timothy McVeigh was executed by lethal injection on June 11, 2001for the crime.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VNJe7snS2k>

Bud Welsh story - Oklahoma bombing

I want us to dwell on this concept of forgiveness, forgiveness empowered by the Holy Spirit. I am going put up a prayer which you may want to say to God silently about those whom you have yet to forgive. I do not need to know what that offence was, that is between you and God.

Musicians, can you come and play quietly please.

Prayer of forgiveness:

Father, even as you have freely forgiven me, I choose to release ----------------- to you

.

I forgive …………………..for sinning against me.

I forgive ……………………specifically for sinning against me in these ways (be specific).

I ask in turn that your sovereign grace and justice would come to bear upon that person.

Be Lord over ……………………, even as I ask you to become Lord and Healer over my wounded heart.

Continue to heal my heart, even as you bring up the residual emotions and reactions not yet wholly known to me.

Help me quickly to face these realities at the foot of the Cross knowing that I have been forgiven but am still being healed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred at the hands of Nazi Germany wrote: The call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving people their sins. Forgiveness is the Christ like suffering which it is the Christian’s duty to bear.[[9]](#footnote-9)

And from Tim Keel: The work of Jesus was the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline. In that sense, the visible church was not the bearer of Christ’s message; it was itself to be the message.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. Debbie Morris *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* 249 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Donald Senior *Jesus: a Gospel portrait* 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Senior 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bridger and Atkinson *Counselling in Context: developing a theological framework* 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.grouporttherapy.com/blog/hurt-people-hurt-people [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bridger and Atkinson *Counselling in Context: developing a theological framework* 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lewis Smedes Forgive and Forget cited in Debbie Morris Forgiving the Dead Man Walking 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Andrew Comiskey *Living Waters NZ* 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tim Keel *Intuitive Leadership* 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)