

Don't we seem to have selfishness hardwired into our system? Take a kid - you don't have to teach them to be selfish. Take away something they want and watch them scream and demand it back. We don't have to teach the desire for revenge. We don't have to teach outrage about injustices we suffer.

Which brings me to the question before us today: Is forgiveness even possible for us as humans? We've been talking about forgiveness for a couple of weeks now, and it's gotten more and more difficult. Last week, we saw that we should forgive because only Forgiveness overcomes evil. Revenge repays evil with more evil, and justice contains evil without eliminating it. When we forgive, we swallow evil and eliminate it.

But then we come up against the real evils in our world. A world filled with genocide, racial and sexual violence. Murder and oppression and acts of terror. Even when we are not the immediate victims of such violence, forgiveness seems impossible.

But even smaller, more personal violence seems impossible to forgive. Betrayal. Abuse. Willful wrongdoing. A refusal by the person who wronged us to acknowledge their sin and an unwillingness to repent. When we and those we love are victims of someone else, we wonder if forgiveness is possible, let alone wise.

[Book + Pic] This is the last week of our series FREE OF CHARGE, based on the work of theologian Miroslav Volf. We spent the first three weeks talking about giving because God is most basically a giver. We saw that our generosity is grounded in God's generosity toward us, and that God enables us to be generous through the Spirit's work in our lives.

For the last two weeks, we've been building on that foundation of giving by talking about forgiveness. We've seen that we forgive because God has forgiven us, that forgiveness is the very way God loves us. And we have seen that forgiveness is how the people of God overcome evil.

[Two worlds: Sin/Condemnation and Forgiveness/Love] Today, we'll see that, though forgiveness is not easy, we are able to forgive because we forgive through God's work in our lives. And when we forgive, we join God in creating a new world, one that our forgiveness invites the offenders into, that they might find life and hope.

Forgiveness is the only way to release someone from the guilt that separates us from each other and from God.

Let's talk about guilt for a moment: it's vital to understand that guilt can't be ignored or done away with. We don't have a time machine or a magic eraser that can take away the sinful actions. Once I have wronged a person, that wrong exists in the world. It can't be unmade. I am guilty.

[Scripture Slide 1] This is why Jesus' work on the cross is so vital. If you have a bible, turn with me to Colossians 2. In this letter, the author is working through exactly what God accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross. He's specifically addressing people who struggle to believe God has truly set them free, people who remain convinced that God only loves us if we keep the rules and regulations of religion. Look at what he says beginning in verse 13:

You were dead because of your sins and because your body of flesh was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. -- Colossians 2:13-14

You were dead in sin. Guilty. Condemned. THEN, God canceled the record of our charges by nailing it to the cross. In Jesus, God condemns Sin, and then dies for us. But by dying for us, God also invites us to die *with him*. Elsewhere, Paul says it like this:

My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. -- Galatians 2:20

When we are in Christ, we die *with him*. Through the great mystery of the Holy Trinity, God takes our guilt on himself and dies so that we might die to our guilt as well. Through the Cross, our guilt has been satisfied. The price has been paid.

And now we are free to live in Christ. Free from guilt, free from shame and condemnation.

This sounds like good news when it's about *us*. It's much more difficult to pass this forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. But consider these words from Miroslav Volf, on whose work this series is based:

The Christian tradition has always maintained three propositions simultaneously. Proposition one: No matter how good our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, before the eyes of the all-knowing and holy God, we are always sinners, all of us, victims included. Proposition two: No matter how evil our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, we always remain God's good creatures, all of us, offenders included. Proposition three: No wrongdoing is an isolated act of the pure evil will of an individual; it is nourished by our sinful inclination and reinforced by a sinful culture. -- Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*

We're all sinners, even victims. We're all made in God's image, even victimizers. And we're all caught in a sinful, violent culture. None of us sins alone, so to speak.

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn in your Bibles to Luke 23. As we consider how we can forgive, I want to look at three of Jesus' statement in the last hours of his life. First, read his words as he carries his cross toward the site of his execution.

A large crowd trailed behind, including many grief-stricken women. But Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are coming when they will say, 'Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.' People will beg the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and plead with the hills, 'Bury us.' For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

As he marches toward his death, Jesus is not concerned for himself, but for the people around him. He warns them that they too should weep for themselves, that the world they inhabit, a world marred by sin, is only going to get worse.

Friends, as we become more like Jesus, we too have compassion for the broken cultures that produce sinners. Yes we still hate sin. Yes we still suffer (as Jesus suffered) at the hands of the violent. But we recognize the problem is not merely one of bad individuals. Our world suffers under the weight of sin. Our world needs resurrection.

See what Jesus says next:

Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left.
Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." -- Luke 23:27-34

This is an odd statement for Jesus to make. He was crucified by Roman soldiers who were well-trained in the art of torture. They knew exactly what they were doing.

Jesus was crucified by savvy Jewish politicians who sacrificed him in the name of peace and security. They knew exactly what they were doing.

Jesus was crucified by a crowd that craved a spectacle. They called for his death. They knew exactly what they were doing.

And yet, Jesus prays, "Forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

How can he pray this?

Because Jesus knows that sin warps us. Sin poisons us. Sin makes us less than who we were created to be. Sin blinds us.

If we truly knew God, we could not crucify God. If we truly saw the image of God in each other, we could not sin against each other. So Jesus prays that we be forgiven our sin, because we don't know what we do.

Friends, we want to believe that I am right and They are wrong. That when someone wrongs me, they are wholly guilty and I am completely innocent.

Jesus knows this is not true. Jesus knows we're all sinners in need of rescue. And so Jesus prays for all of us. Jesus forgives all of us. And Jesus invites us to do the same.

[Flow graphic w/ Forgiveness] How can we forgive? Not on our own power. But by reaching for God's forgiveness. By recognizing that, just as God has already forgiven US, God has already forgiven THEM. And just as God invites us to die with Jesus, just as God offers us the power of Jesus' resurrection, so God invites us to forgive with Jesus.

[Scripture Slide 3] But what about when it hurts too badly? What about when the sins are too great, the wounds too deep? What can Jesus possibly say to us when we are angry even at God? Turn over to Matthew 27. This is during Jesus' final moments on the cross.

At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. At about three o'clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" -- Matthew 27:45-46

In his final moments of life, God expresses a sense of alienation from God. God gives voice to our feeling of abandonment, of the deep, existential wounds our spirits bear when we are wronged.

In this moment, God is with even the God-forsaken. Which means that if you need to rage, you rage in the arms of God. If you need to kick and cuss and spew out the venom, you do that in the arms of God.

When our wounds are deep enough, we need to be cradled and loved before we can forgive. And in Christ, this is what God does for us. God embraces us, holds us in our pain, assures us that even when we have reached the end of our ability to go on, we have not surpassed God's love.

God's love enables us to heal. And God's love even, eventually, enables us to love the person who hurt us. There will come a day, as we persist in God's love for us, that we become able to earnestly seek their good, their flourishing.

Of course, as we talked about last week, that doesn't mean automatically we're allow that person back into our lives. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting while the possibility for future hurt persists. We must be wise as we forgive - but even in this, God is with us, enabling us.

Forgiveness is something we do again and again. It's a stumbling, halting thing. We forgive, then we forgive again and forgive again. We face the anger, hurt, suspicion when it arises. And we choose to release it. Then release it again. Then release it again.

As we persist in forgiveness, God enlivens us. God's Spirit helps us to forgive.

The Spirit's life is for both us and the offender. And this is what's difficult for those of us who live in a quid-pro-quo world. A world of exchange, a world of justice. If you believe you've earned what you have, forgiveness doesn't make sense because it can't be earned. If you believe everything should be fair, you can't forgive because by definition forgiveness is unfair.

But friends, the story of God is not a story of justice and fairness. For we who follow Jesus, our story is GIFT. God is a giver who created the world out of abundance. God gives and gives and gives and gives. And when we spit on God's gifts, when we trample them underfoot, God gives up God's place in Heaven so that we might be cleansed of our guilt, forgiven. God gives up his very life that we might be forgiven and live in God's new world not as sinners, but as saints.

God's forgiveness creates a new world. God forgives us so that we can enter into the new reality God is bringing forth. God invites us to forgive as we have been forgiven that we might create new worlds of possibility for even those who have wronged us.

One of the most famous stories of forgiveness is Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Miserables*. The main character is Jean Valjean, a man who, at the beginning of the film, has fallen on hard times. Take a look at what happens to him when he encounters a kind Bishop:

[[Les Mis clip: The Bishop](#)] There's a version of *Les Mis* that ends with this scene. Jean Valjean begins life as a good man, falls onto hard times and is restored. It would make a good story.

Commented [1]: +morrishpartyof5@gmail.com This is for Sunday 10/16. Can you handle it?

But Hugo chose to tell a different story, one that *begins* with forgiveness. Throughout the rest of the story, we see the ramifications of the Bishop's forgiveness, how Jean Valjean is transformed, and how his new life challenges the pain and violence that surrounds him.

Friends, God's great gift in forgiving us is this: We do not have to be trapped in the pain and hate of unforgiveness. We can receive that forgiveness from God, and through God's Holy Spirit, turn to those who have wronged us and offer them the same forgiveness. Like Valjean's Bishop, we can forgive such that those we forgive are transformed, welcomed into God's new life as well.

What new world might exist in your family if you were to offer forgiveness? What new friendship might grow in place of that broken one if you could join God in forgiving them? How might Thanksgiving or Christmas look different this year?

Let's be a church that forgives and forgives and forgives. Let's be a people who stands before God, hands open to receive God's forgiveness. Then, overwhelmed by God's generosity and empowered by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, let us turn to those who have wronged us and offer them the same gift. Let them join us as though they had not wronged us in the first place.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] God set the table for us before creation. We participate to become forgivers.

1. When in the last week did I extend forgiveness to someone who wronged me?
2. When in the last week did I withhold forgiveness?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to withhold forgiveness?
4. How can I pass God's forgiveness to someone who has wronged me this week?