

“Forgiveness”

Psalm 103:2,3, 10-14 & Matthew 18:21-35

6/18/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Since Don Henley’s band came through town last week, I thought it might be appropriate to recall words to one his early songs that brought his writing and musical talents to public recognition.¹ And it doesn’t matter what musical type from which the song comes, . . . it could have come from Country, Alternative, Post-Industrial or Folk, the song is about “the blues.” It’s about a loss of relationship but what makes the words unique are that it has to do with forgiveness.

“The Heart of the Matter”

“I got the call today, I didn’t wanna hear but I knew that it would come. An old true friend of ours was talkin’ on the phone, she said you found someone. And I thought of all the bad luck and the struggles we went through – and how I lost me and you lost you. What are all these voices outside love’s open door, make us throw off our contentment and beg for something more?”

(Chorus) “I’m learning to live without you now but I miss you sometimes. The more I know, the less I understand all the things I thought I knew I’m learning

¹ Out of all of the members of the band “The Eagles,” Don Henley had the most successful solo career. After the group broke up in 1982, Henley released his first solo album, *I Can’t Stand Still*. Although it wasn’t as successful as an Eagles record, the album performed respectably, launching the number three single “Dirty Laundry” and going gold. *Building the Perfect Beast* followed two years later and established Henley as a solo star in his own right. Featuring the Top 10 hits “Boys of Summer” and “All She Wants to Do Is Dance,” as well as the Top 40 singles “Not Enough Love in the World” and “Sunset Grill,” the album sold over two million copies and stayed on the charts for over a year.

Henley’s third album, 1989’s *The End of the Innocence*, was his most ambitious record yet, as well as his most commercially successful. The album sold over three million copies and stayed on the charts for nearly three years, launching the hit singles “The End of the Innocence,” “**Heart of the Matter**,” “New York Minute,” “How Bad Do You Want It?” and “The Last Worthless Evening.” Henley reunited with the Eagles in 1994, embarking on a worldwide tour. The group released a live album culled from an appearance on MTV Unplugged called *Hell Freezes Over* and was a major success, selling over five million copies by the summer of 1995. The group decided not to pursue any more projects together and Henley continued working on his solo albums. ~ Stephen Thomas Erlewine, All-Music Guide

again. I’ve been trying to get down to the heart of the matter but my will gets weak and my thoughts even scatter. But I think it’s about forgiveness, forgiveness, even if, . . . even if you don’t love me anymore.

“Ah, these times are so uncertain there’s a yearning undefined – people filled with rage. We all need a little tenderness, how can love survive in such a graceless age? The trust and self-assurance that lead to happiness, they’re the very things we kill I guess. Pride and competition cannot fill these empty arms and the work I put between us, you know it doesn’t keep me warm.

(Chorus Repeats)²

“There are people in your life who’ve come and gone. They let you down you know they hurt your pride. You better put it all behind you babe ‘cause life goes on, . . . you keep carryin’ that anger, . . . it’ll eat you up inside.

(Chorus) I’ve been trying to get down to the heart of the matter but my will gets weak and my thoughts seem to scatter. But I think it’s about forgiveness, forgiveness, even if, . . . even if you don’t love me anymore.

(Chorus Repeats)³

The rather emotionally gripping words to Don Henley’s song remind us that there are two things that cause us the most anxiety – **the past** (that can’t be changed) and **the future** (which in the present is always unpredictable). In some ways, the future might be a little easier to handle because we know that if we try to live rational and consistent lives – keeping our promises at work and in relationships – life will tend to even out with some consistency.

The past seems to be what ravages our emotions the most. “If only we had done this . . . or that” we tell ourselves. Our paths behind will always be littered with unfulfilled best intentions because of laziness,

² “I’m learning to live without you now but I miss you babe.

The more I know, the less I understand all the things I thought I knew that I’ll have to learn again.

I’ve been trying to get down to the heart of the matter but everything changes and my friends are all scattered.

But I think it’s about forgiveness, forgiveness, even if, . . . even if you don’t love me anymore.

³ Don Henley’s ‘The Heart of the Matter’ on The End of the Innocence CD (The David Geffen Company, 1989). The last chorus edited out because of repetition.

self-centeredness or because we simply did not know any better in certain situations.

Forgiveness changes all that. When we are forgiven or when we forgive, our past becomes accepted in that we learn to embrace our pain. We accept our life because we know that any life we choose will have pain and it is better to choose a life than not. By choosing to reclaim what life we have, we can move on away from the paralyzing power of grudges and guilt that plague us and cause us to stop living life. What we have been, what we are and what we may become rallies around forgiveness. So forgiveness is central to our feelings about ourselves. It is central to how we relate to ourselves, to others and to God. Forgiveness sits right in the middle of our entire existence as a person.

In the Bible, forgiveness is initially an act of God. God's forgiveness takes the barriers away that separate us from having a relationship with God. Forgiveness removes the obstacles that prevent us from growing in human relationships.

In the Old Testament, most of the discussion was about acts of injustice separating people from God. When people seemed to disregard God's suggestions for life, the quality of their lives diminished. Proverbs says the more people go on their own way, the worse their lives sometimes become.

Through the centuries, whenever people felt cut off from knowing the One Who made them, they've ended up with a catch-as-catch can value system that only mirrored what was popular at the time. Life can become quite meaningless – whether you were a successful merchant 3,000 years ago or are an IBM vice-president on the eighth floor of the HSBC central office building today. But the Old Testament sages talked of how God forgives us.

Early in Israelite history, God was thought of as a great mighty power up there somewhere Who, for some unknown but loving reasons, chose to be more present with them as a people. Ancient Israel thought of forgiveness more as a national blessing than as individuals punching the time clock in the factory of good deeds. But once the rituals got started, the priests used their rhetoric of sacrifice and legal terminology. Forgiveness was understood as happening in a great courthouse and the words of

“covering sin” or “atonement” were used. God's forgiveness of sin was thought to be like sending wrongs away, ... something like banishing evil. And once the sacrificial rituals became the custom, the strong symbolism of animal sacrifice was the primary drama in the liturgy to express forgiveness.

In the New Testament, Paul thought in courtroom metaphors – stating that Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins. He said that Christ died for our sins and Paul then became the primary architect of the theology of “substitutionary atonement.”⁴

An alternate way of looking at forgiveness comes to us from **the prophetic tradition**. The prophets protested vehemently against the mechanical and formal performance of the sacrifices.

In expressing what he understood God to want, **Hosea** said “For I desire steadfast love and *not* sacrifice, the knowledge of God *rather* than burnt offerings.” **Joel** said it this way, “Rend your hearts and *not* your garments.” **Isaiah** said, “It *isn't* the fast that I choose, ... *rather*, I'd prefer you to loose the bonds of wickedness and undo the thongs of that yoke. Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house.” So the prophets were saying to forget the hocus-pocus of the temple and just repent and get your behavior straightened out.

Continuing in this prophetic tradition on repentance, **John the Baptist** came along and added some things. John taught that in repentance, one receives the Spirit of God. He talked about the eminence of God's kingdom and then added the ritual of water baptism.

When **Jesus** entered the scene, He taught like John, saying, “The kingdom of God's reign is now among you and within you. Repent, turn about now because it is the end times.”

Throughout the last months of His teaching, Jesus deepened the prophetic demand for repentance by advising people to straighten out their lives by

⁴ This area of theology in the Reformed theological framework is well expressed in C.S. Lewis children's story The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (New York: Collier, 1950) or more intensely expressed in his space trilogy novels (Out of the Silent Planet (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Perelandra (New York: Macmillan, 1944) and That Hideous Strength (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

aligning behavior with what is right. He taught that true repentance, that leads to forgiveness, begins with control over our inner natures. That the law of God requires not only our outward conformity but it demands an inner alignment of our feelings and thoughts. And if we forgive others, we somehow experience forgiveness ourselves.

In Jesus' usual pattern on how to pray He said "... and forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*" More pointedly, the unmerciful servant who couldn't forgive someone else a debt of twenty bucks experiences undoing by his master who originally forgave him millions. Jesus concluded, "So also God will do to every one of you if you do not forgive others from your heart."

Forgiveness, then, is something we receive from God (Who loves us like a parent). Our ability to readily forgive others is something that can become a personality trait – the way we are as a person at the very core of our being. The good news this morning, and every morning of our existence, is that God has forgiven us and accepts us totally as we are and there is nothing that can ever change that.

Once we've crossed that threshold of realizing we are forgiven children of God, we find that forgiving others can come easier. But there are some practical things about forgiveness.

First, **forgiveness involves suffering.**⁵ We don't forgive someone unless we've been hurt. When we pretend to forgive someone who hasn't really hurt us, we are making it a cheap indulgence. Not every rippling experience from another actually hurts us.

We can get annoyed by people who are late for appointments or those who tell boring stories at dinner or those who cut in front of us at the checkout counter – but we are not hurt! Sometimes we are defeated by those who get the promotions we wanted or who seem to be ahead of us – but we are not hurt! People slight us, ... the professors who forget our names only two years after graduation. There's the boss who doesn't invite us to their child's wedding,

⁵ See Lewis Smedes, 'Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past' *Christianity Today*, Jan. 7, 1983, p.22f. See also W.A. Quanbeck, 'Forgiveness,' *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abindgon, 1962) vo. 2, pp.315-319

... the minister who can't pick up our name from only shaking hands with us at the door.

The kinds of hurts that truly need forgiving are deep and moral. They are deep because they slice at the fiber that holds human relationships together. They are moral because they are wrong, unfair or intolerable. We simply cannot chalk these kind of mistakes up to being human or eccentric.

What needs forgiveness are the things that stop growth in our relationship with that person. It might be a disloyal act when someone treats us as a stranger. It could be when a spouse has an affair outside of the marriage. It might be when a person promises to come through with a loan but reneges. It may be when a friend promises to recommend you for a promotion but lets you down, ... or when a parent fails to show up when you are given a coveted award. And if we turn the screw a little tighter, disloyalty turns into betrayal. Disloyalty makes strangers of people who belong to one another – betrayal turns them into enemies.

So the first task of forgiveness is to determine if there has been genuine hurt. If we have not been genuinely hurt, we really don't have something to forgive.

The next task related to forgiveness is to **separate the offensive action from the person performing it.** It is somewhat true that what we do, we are. But we would be wise, I believe, to view the offending person not as the person who hurt us but as the person who has failed out of weakness. I am convinced that people offend and oppress others out of weakness, ... and there is little *true* arrogance as a motive for wrong behavior (except in the case of sociopaths who have no conscience). I fully believe that you and I make our mistakes (sometimes *miserable* mistakes) out of fear, insecurity and our inability to get inside someone else's feelings to see how our behavior impacts on them.

The late Will Rogers used to say that he "never met a person he didn't like" and I can understand that. I think he knew that we all have fragile self-concepts, ... that in reality, *all* prejudice, jealousy, envy and theft is part of the crude human attempt to pull ourselves out of the feeling of unworthiness. Said differently, the task we have in forgiveness is to separate wrong behavior from the other person's true value as a created being of God.

By always keeping the other person's worth in the forefront of our mind and heart, we can be constantly opening new doors for relationships with others. You know that I'm talking about gracefulness. Are you a person full of grace?

Put in practical business terms, to solve conflicts we are supposed to **send good "I" messages**. For example, ... suppose a relative of yours continually puts you down with jokes on social occasions. You could say, "You are a stupid, insensitive, big-mouthed nerd who cares only about yourself."

We would be wiser to single out behavior and express feelings of how we have been hurt as a result, rather than attack the offending person's worth in the process. In this case, we would respond more appropriately by saying, "When we are around others, you continually put me down and make me the brunt of your jokes." (This describes the behavior.) "And this makes me very angry and frustrated being around you as you engage in that kind of oppressive talk." (This expresses your hurt as a result of that behavior.)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we always had the presence of mind and emotion to respond in our hurt instead of reacting? The point, then, is to separate the action from the person's individual worth – confronting it and forgiving them for their weakness. Obviously this is a conflict management principle taught in classes and available in books.

The last element of forgiveness is just a by-product of the act of forgiveness. In forgiving another, we can start over again – but forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. If we were able to completely forget the genuine hurt another person caused us (and no one really does), we would be air-headed beings who really don't have any feelings at all – uninvolved with life. Remembrance of the hurt we've experienced actually gives meaning to our forgiveness.

Remembering the gravity of the hurt is not in the sense of saying "Don't you ever forget how much I've forgiven you. Remembering the hurt is more in the sense of how death gives meaning to life. Because the clock of death is ticking for each of us, what we do with ourselves matters every moment. We should never get out of touch with the importance of how we're living our lives. If we forgive another, our life can go on but we will still have to live with the consequences of their action.

What do you do when there is no repentance on the other person's part? Why would we want to forgive? And what does the idea of "starting over" have to do with cases where someone has hurt us and has moved on out of our lives?

Revenge never evens the score. What are we supposed to do with our anger and hurt for someone who has hurt us? How does forgiveness fit into the picture of someone who has gone through the pain and devastating hurt of divorce? It is clearly an experience where the potential for further relationship growth may not even exist. Why forgive someone who isn't looking for it?

We have to forgive because even if the relationship will not resume again, **forgiving them will at least liberate us** from the life-long chains and imprisonment of resentment, bitterness and anger which turns into depression – all of which wrecks our immune system and poisons our body, mind and spirit. Not forgiving will kill us. Living with resentment is suicide.

In forgiving others, we can get on with our own lives. By forgiving another offending person, we can liberate ourselves from the prison house of grudges. In forgiving others, we can find a peace that calms our tendency to want revenge. The more we forgive others, the more *we* are mindful of how God forgives us every time we hurt, let down or betray God. "For it is in pardoning that we are pardoned" as St. Francis wrote.

As we forgive others, God forgives us. Forgiveness, then, is the sign, ... the eye opener, ... the opening curtain of the drama called the Christian life. It is the sign that God is actually here in our midst.

In our day, organized religion has fallen on hard times. Church leaders are often caught up and diverted away from God's redemptive work by their arguments over new social issues or theological disputes. Instead of helping others out of their predicaments, they invest enormous amounts of their energy into keeping everything orderly and organized in the ways they've traditionally done things before. One wonders where God fits in American religion.

If you ever want to find the reality of the presence of God, look for acts of forgiveness.⁶ Watch for it as you see individuals in the act of acceptance and forgiveness of others around them. But look quick when you see forgiveness – it really is (as Don Henley sings) the heart of the matter. Look for acts of forgiveness because where there is forgiveness, there is the presence of God. Forgiveness is one place you can really know that God is standing in your midst.



⁶ The Pope recently pardoned the man who had shot him.