

Homily – Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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March 6, 2016 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande

Those that teach sermon writing say that a person must have one hand on the Bible and one hand on a newspaper in order to be relevant and meaningful. I think this is true, and each week when I read the New York Times I get a lot of good ideas about potential sermon topics.

In addition, my own experience has shown that sermon writing should connect the Bible to theology, psychology and sociology. It is important to combine our study of God with our study of the human mind and with the study of how human beings come together in groups and communities.

Theology, psychology and sociology.

Now, a problem arises when I write homilies since I have been trained in theology, but not the other two.

There are priests who are trained in sociology or psychology, and several of you here at St. Barnabas have advanced degrees in these other areas, but I do not. I must rely on studying about these other related topics and my own lived experience.

My own lived experience is not your lived experience, which means I cannot and should not provide prescriptive advice. There is no one size fits all check list for the things most of us have come up in life. This is especially true of today's topic of forgiveness.

I have been here at St. Barnabas eight months, yes, it has already been eight months, and I have gotten to know some of you and your stories. Some of you have lived through or are currently living through some vivid experiences.

Health issues, money issues, anger issues, and self-esteem issues – these are just a few of the wounds that we carry around with us. Some of these are common experiences and some of them are uncommon.

In the Gospels, Jesus seems to have a pretty good understanding of human nature and the particular or common experiences of the person in front of him. He gives very particular, circumstantial advice to some like the woman at the well, and the

rich young ruler. These wisdom teachings can be very useful to us if we also share the particular circumstance.

At other times Jesus gives advice that is common to everyone at all times, and today we hear about the wisdom of forgiveness and the challenges of reconciliation.

In today's parable we have a younger son who has forgiven himself.

We also have an older son or brother who is so resentful of the past that he clings to his hurt and refused to forgive his younger brother. In the story we see the hurt extended as the older son begins to resent the actions of his father. The older son refuses to forgive his brother or his father.

Finally, we have the father himself who seems to forgive both his sons but is only reconciled to the younger son. Because the forgiveness is not reciprocal, there is no reconciliation with the older son.

I don't think any of this parable is new news to any of you. As followers of Jesus we spend quite a bit of time trying to figure out forgiveness. The terms forgiveness and reconciliation are almost synonymous with Jesus. In the Gospels Jesus taught about forgiveness thirty-five times.

And, the way he died is an example of forgiveness. In the Gospel of Luke as he was dying on the Cross, *"Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'"*

We may know that followers of Jesus are supposed to forgive, but this doesn't make it easier. Forgiveness is hard. It is work. It is counter to our default nature to hold on to the wrong that has been done to us. However, "without forgiveness, people remain trapped in their past, obsessing over what has been done to them. While they are looking back to the past, it is impossible to look forward. If they are resentful of the past, when they do glimpse the future they are likely to see continual experiences of what happened in the past. And find most of their effort going into self-protective measures."

Today, I want to share some practical things about forgiveness that I learned from Dr. Rob Voyle in a class I attended two years ago in Arizona.

"Some people find it very easy to forgive, while others, often despite their best efforts, find it difficult to release their resentment and live joyfully in the present

moment.... When people can't forgive, it is because they don't know how, or because some part of them objects to forgiving and that objection needs to be satisfied before the person will be free to forgive."

Most of us don't practice forgiveness on a daily basis, and when we don't practice something we don't get any better at it. This leaves us with four options.

1. We can stay resentful.
2. We can numb our pain.
3. We can avoid the context in which the pain arises.
4. Or, we can learn to forgive.

When we stay stuck in resentment it is often because we have "a current demand that something in the past should have been different. While the event that created our resentment may be in the past, the resentment is in the present and is manifested as a demand about the past. What we cannot do is change the past. It doesn't matter how bad or egregious the offending behavior was, nor how hard we demand in the present moment that they had not done what they did, it is in the past and we cannot change the past. What we can do is change how we view the past, and how we reorient from what happened to what we want to happen in the future. Forgiveness is something that we do in the present to let go of the demand that the past would have been different." This understanding of the past and of the present and of the future is foundational to the practice of forgiveness.

The past is the past. Forgiving is not forgetting the past, but it is taking steps to keep us from continuously reliving the past and the painful memories associated with the original experience. We let go of the pain.

It also means we let go of any hope of benefit from the injury. This is not just financial benefit, but it is letting go of the status or power that goes along with being a victim or martyr. "When we forgive we can no longer use the injury as a means to gain sympathy from, or to influence or apply leverage to, either the perpetrator or others who many know of the injury."

We let go of our need for sympathy, but this does not mean that we need to also reconcile with the person who has wronged us. "Forgiveness is essentially something we do independently of the person who offended us. If we waited for people to ask for our forgiveness, we may have a very long wait before we release the anger and resentment that we carry around. The person who injured us may be long gone, dead, or totally unconcerned about whether we forgive. Remember, the primary beneficiary of forgiveness is the person doing the forgiving."

“Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires the mutual engagement of both parties and that the two parties share a common set of values that they agree to live by as they build a better future for both.” Notably, one party cannot coerce reconciliation from the other. “It is not uncommon for perpetrators to beg or manipulate others for forgiveness and reconciliation when they have shown no indication that they have amended their ways. Forgiveness is mandated by Jesus in the scriptures, and while reconciliation is a desired goal, the scriptures also acknowledge that sometimes reconciliation may not be achievable.” Reconciliation can only occur when wrongs have been acknowledged and wrongs will not be repeated.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are related but are not the same thing.

“Trying to forgive some people seems a huge agonizing mountain to climb. The good news is that we don’t need to forgive them on our own... rather we can become part of God’s forgiveness for them.” We can be assured that the person who has wronged us is still the beloved of God and has been forgiven by God. God has infinite grace for us, and for them.

These brief words about forgiveness and reconciliation are some of what I learned from that training in Arizona – training that combines theology, psychology, and sociology. I hope you found some useful things for your life in the intersection of these three areas.

As I end today, let me share a poignant prayer of forgiveness that was found in 1945 in Germany’s Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.

“Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. And when they have come to judgment let all of the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.” [Oxford Book of Prayer]

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

“Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.”

--*Ann Landers*

“With Christ’s prayer of forgiveness from the cross the universal religion of revenge is overcome and the universal law of retaliation is annulled.” --*Jurgen Moltman*

“Forgiveness is the economy of the heart... Forgiveness saves expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of the spirits.” --*Hannah More*

“Forgiving someone won’t make them nice, it will however make you nicer.” --*Unknown*

“Without forgiveness there can be no healing.” --*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” --*Louis B. Smedes*

“When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than try to avenge it?” --*Eleanor Roosevelt*

“Resenting someone is a way of never leaving that person.” --*Kare Anderson*

“Sincere forgiveness isn’t colored with expectations that the other person apologize or change. Don’t worry whether or not they finally understand you. Love them and release them. Life feeds back truth to people in its own way and time. – just like it does for you and me.” --*Sara Paddison*

“When you forgive, you in no way change the past – but you sure do change the future.”
--*Bernard Meltzer*

“We need to forgive and remember and not forgive and forget.” --*Robert McDonald*

“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.” --*Nelson Mandela*

“Forgiveness is giving your back what you had before.” --*Unknown*

“The gate to the Kingdom of God is narrow, not because it requires a narrow mindset or viewpoint to enter; rather it is narrow because so few are able to trust that God’s love is so wide. It is the wideness of God’s love that embraces us all that unites us beyond our human division.”
--*Rob Voyle*