



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Faculty of Forgiveness

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 12, 2016
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 7:36-8:3*

In the fall of 1983, Paul, a former member of my youth group, was 26 years old, married, father of a little girl, and driving on a rural road near his parents' home in south Georgia. As he came into a clearing, he heard the screeching of brakes—and the next thing he knew, he was on the ground and his legs were numb and the wreckage was severe. It turned out that the other driver, who had been drinking, missed the curve and slammed into Paul's car. Paul's hip and pelvis were ripped away and he suffered through several operations and many months of rehabilitation.

Paul surrendered to his sorrow, anger, self-pity and utter despair. He told me that it was worse than death. During the long months of winter, Paul began to visit with his rector, discussing his grief, his physical condition and the difficult issue of forgiveness.

Ah, forgiveness, that fabulous and difficult gift from God. Somebody hurts you, or you hurt yourself—maybe yesterday or a lifetime ago—and you can't forget it! In your mind, you did not deserve the damage inflicted, and the hurt went deep and continues to hurt now.

You and Paul are not alone! We all are on a journey in a world where people hurt each other—a friend betrays us, a spouse leaves us, a parent abuses us, a drunk hits us, a terrorist maims and kills innocent people in a nightclub in Orlando—and we look for something that will bring us peace, reconciliation, healing.

And so I ask this morning: Who out there, or perhaps in here, needs your forgiveness, your absolution for some act, or word, or neglect that hurt you? And, from whom do you need forgiveness, from whom do you need absolution for some act, or word, or neglect of yours that hurt them?

I'm bold to ask these questions because the lack of forgiveness is one of the primary causes of human distress. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and pastoral therapists deal with this issue in a great majority of the people who come to them for help. The absence of forgiveness—with its twin sisters of rage and guilt—is the primary destroyer of human tranquility and peace.

Hannah Arendt in her important book titled *The Human Condition* shares her discovery of the only power that can stop the constant stream of painful memories: "The faculty of forgiveness." Forgiveness is God's gift. God began the forgiving business early in humanity's journey; and according to Christians it reached its pinnacle in the life, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. In God's bountiful forgiveness, you and I are bid by its effect on us to be part and parcel of this "faculty of forgiveness."

This gift, this faculty of God, is displayed vividly in this week's Gospel text. Jesus is invited by Simon the Pharisee to be his guest at a local dinner party.

The meal would have been served in the Roman manner fashionable in the wealthier homes of the city. There would be couches, with each guest supported on an elbow, his sandals removed. Behind the couches and the tables, hidden in the shadows, would be outsiders permitted to approach the guests for various suppliant reasons.

One of these outsiders is a woman who is referred to in Luke as a "sinner." Simon's later contemptuous reference to her suggests that he thinks she is a prostitute. We can assume that the viciousness of Simon's comment is enough to freeze everyone into silence. How does the rabbi from Nazareth respond?

Jesus says, almost casually, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Is there sarcasm in Simon's reply? "Teacher, speak." Jesus tells the story of two debtors and then asks a question. "Which of them will love him more?" Simon's reply betrays his growing unease. By this time in the conversation, authority has passed from host to guest.

Now Jesus begins his dissection of Simon's pretensions. One by one he lists the small but calculated insults that have been dealt him since he arrived as a guest, presenting them not as hurts to himself but as social omissions on Simon's part as host.

Jesus shows the glaring contrast between Simon's behavior and the tenderness and respect offered by the woman. Luke depicts Simon as convinced of his own righteousness, a self-assuredness that doesn't see a need for forgiveness. Unable to feel its need, he cannot know forgiveness and cannot experience the love that makes it possible to forgive others.

In case anyone missed his point, Jesus turns to the woman and says, "Your sins are forgiven."

One of the challenges presented to us in this dinner encounter is the difficulty we humans have in believing the depth and generosity of God's forgiveness. In the midst of this dilemma, it's important for us to imagine the cross of Christ, which proclaims with unmistakable clarity that there is nothing we can do—nothing at all—that is beyond God's ability and willingness to forgive. The Apostle Paul declared succinctly in his letter to the Romans: "There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus."

And that brings me back to our forgiveness of each other. How can we twist and turn over the myriad of hurts we nurse in the face of God's boundless mercy on us? I really don't know all the reasons we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven, but we are past masters at it. Like Simon, we tend to be legalistic—we like to keep score. Like the little girl who was always being tormented by her little brother. Finally in desperation, her mother told her that Jesus had told Peter to forgive seventy times seven. Well, it seemed to work until several days later when the little brother broke his sister's doll. She didn't say a word, but as she went out of the room her mother heard her say through clenched teeth, "That's 436."

But in addition to keeping score, there's the primary matter of perspective. Often we care more about things like pretense, social standing, reputation, success, competition, social mores, and ideology, than we do about honoring and caring for those who are lost and last and least. Remember Jesus' challenging words in Matthew 25: "As you've showed mercy and respect to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you've shown it to me."

So, how can we find our perspective? Where's the gracious touch that enables us to be forgiving people? Again, the best place to look is at the cross of Christ, for it was there that Jesus said, "Forgive them." God's forgiveness of us is unending, and our need to forgive others is unending, too. God's gift of forgiveness of us is massive in its proportions. It is more than enough to bring healing balm to tortured psyches and broken relationships.

A number of years ago, I asked Paul, who is now a psychotherapist, how he was able to break through the hardship of utter despair and retributive anger. He said it happened on a pilgrimage to Coventry Cathedral in England. Pilgrims come upon the new cathedral rather suddenly—the magnificence of the new stone and glass structure in the shadow of the Gothic ruins is startling. Paul told me that he spent nearly an hour in a Eucharist in the new cathedral. The double-life-sized bronze figure of Michael, the Archangel, wings unfurled, standing over a prostrate and defeated figure of evil, the ceiling tapestries by Graham Sutherland, the stunning baptistry over which is framed floor-to-ceiling contemporary stained glass by John Piper, and the exquisite high altar flanked by the blue cosmos window.

And then came the breakthrough! Walking away from the communion rail, he saw the ruins of the old 14th Century cathedral through the clear etched glass... the cathedral destroyed by the Nazis' Luftwaffe bombers on the night of November 14, 1940. Paul ventured through the shell of the outer wall and learned from an elderly priest the story ... that on the morning following the raid, the cathedral clergy, digging in the rubble, fashioned one cross of burned timbers and a second one of large, iron nails. On the wall behind the altar they wrote with a piece of charred wood the words, "Father, forgive." On that same day, Coventry Cathedral launched the beginnings of what is now a worldwide ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation called "The Community of the Cross of Nails."

Paul told me that it was in that place that he began to receive God's enormous grace of forgiveness. He jotted down a few emerging characteristics that he wanted to live by:

- + Give up your desire to get even;
- + Revise your caricature of the one who hurt you;
- + Surrender feelings of hatred and resentment;
- + Open yourself to the possibility of receiving forgiveness;
- + Avail yourself of the possibility of reconciliation.

He told me that some years later he sought out the one who drove into him that day. He obtained his contact information and wrote him a note in which he expressed his desire to forgive him for the raw deed. He received back a belated but heartfelt and sincere apology. Last I heard they had plans to meet each other in person.

So, I ask, who needs your forgiveness? Will they get it? And, who needs to forgive you? Will you receive it?

Jesus said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I tell you, her sins which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." Could it be that those same words would be said of us.

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