

Which is easier...

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 19, 2006

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Texts:

Isa 43:18-25

Mk 2:1-12

The topic of the day is forgiveness. Not just in this pulpit either. We talk a lot about forgiveness outside of this building. We talk about forgiveness when someone dear to us starts to die and we want to settle things, or when we ourselves start to die, and want to settle things. We talk about forgiveness when we talk about bankruptcy reform or how to improve our credit score. We talk about forgiveness when we consider what to do with convicted sex offenders who have served their time and want to live in our communities. We talk about forgiveness when we talk about accountability, and the importance of consequences for managing worker productivity and boundaries for healthy child development.

But I don't just want to talk about forgiveness. What I really want is to talk about what Christians should do about forgiveness. And that is a whole nother question. Now we have entered deep and dangerous theological waters. Because forgiveness is risky and painful business.

Unfortunately, we Christians often talk about forgiveness as if it is fairly simple and easy. That may be because we focus on our being forgiven by God and not our having to forgive others. Or it may be because we do not think of anything really biting when we list things we need to forgive. Or it may be something even deeper. We may give simple and easy answers that are out of touch with real pain because we believe deep down that Jesus gave simple and easy answers and was out of touch with real pain.

Jesus certainly had much to say about forgiveness, and his teachings on these topics were often seen as simple. How many times do we forgive the repentant sinner? Seven times? Try seven times seventy times¹ (that's four-hundred and ninety times—and don't try to keep track, the point is probably to just keep on forgiving). Who gets to throw the first stone to exact the justice of God against the woman who is caught in adultery? The one who is without sin.² (By the way, there is only one who is so qualified, and we know who that one person is—and then he doesn't throw the stone.) Do not judge, lest you be judged.³ Those words seem pretty clear. And when we list all those passages together, Jesus does not seem to wrestle much with the complexity of the world. He starts to sound naïve and simplistic. Maybe he just didn't understand the radical nature of evil in the world. Or maybe he did.

Take a look at this morning's story. A man, clearly in need of healing, is brought to Jesus. His friends are so devoted to him, and so worried about him that they destroy another person's house to get him to Jesus. Even before we hear the rest of the story, we have some idea of what should happen next. If this is like most of the miraculous healing stories, then Jesus will forgive and

¹ Mt 18:21-22,

² Jn 8:1-11

³ Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37;

Jesus will heal. And these two things he does. But in between those two actions, Jesus poses the question which has haunted me for the last three weeks: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk?”

Is this question rhetorical? Perhaps. But what if it is not? I think that this question could be both an appreciation of the difficulty of forgiveness and a challenge to the hearers to forgive. And like many of the great questions of Jesus, the more I hear this question, the more I think it is addressed to us. What should a Christian do with forgiveness? That is the question that I want us to think about today.

But first I want to ask another question—one that I think that Jesus would appreciate. Why is it often so hard to forgive? Well, for one thing, many times forgiveness is not a little thing, because the things done to require forgiveness are often not little things. Families face incest or alcoholism or work-oholism or divorce. Nations go to war against nations and men, women and children are killed or painfully and irreparably wounded. Long-standing inequalities rooted in race or gender or geographic location lift generations of some types of people at the expense of generations of other types of people. These are not little things.

For another thing, often the thing which we are asked to forgive continues to hurt us. It is not something that goes away quickly. Like when American blacks are asked to forgive slavery when the economic inequality and oppression rooted in slavery continue. Or when grown abused children are asked to forgive their abuser when they still have nightmares years later. When the pain is deep, and the suffering continues, forgiveness can be hard and confusing. And in those times...I would imagine that it seems easier to tell a paralytic to walk than to forgive the person or people responsible for one’s pain.

I have been reading a book titled *The Sunflower*⁴ this week. It was written by Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. The book has two sections. In the first section, Simon tells the story of a particularly difficult experience he had during his time in a concentration camp. He begins by recounting the terrible conditions, how death was all around him, in his eyes, in his ears, in his nose. Sadistic guards preyed on the weak and vulnerable, or the strong—anyone who stood out. Simon’s friends were killed. His family was killed. And then he is sent to work at a German military hospital. The first day there, Simon is pulled out of line by a nurse. She takes him into the room of a dying SS soldier. The SS man, his name is Karl, knows that he is dying and has asked to talk to a Jew.

While traveling with a convoy to the Russian front a few weeks earlier, Karl and his fellow soldiers were bombed by the Russians. They exacted their revenge on the local Jewish population. A group of about 300 Jews were rounded up. Karl remembers especially the children—how fearful their eyes were. The strongest Jewish men were forced to carry barrels of gasoline up to the second floor of one of the houses. Then all of the Jews were forced into the house. Machine guns were positioned around the house, and hand grenades were thrown in to ignite the barrels. As men, women, and children burned alive, the soldiers could see the people...hear the screams...smell the smoke. One Jewish man stood next to his wife, his clothes

⁴ Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower: on the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Schocken Books: New York, 1997.

ablaze, holding their infant son. The man, deciding to risk bullets over flames, leapt with his wife out the second story window. Karl shot them. Karl, sobbing, asks Simon, who knows that his own family has been killed in the same way, for forgiveness.

Which is easier, to forgive or to make a paralytic walk?

As many of you know, I have been interning on Capitol Hill this spring. In that capacity, I attended a death penalty hearing a few weeks ago, where I heard testimony from a woman who lost her 23 year old daughter in a brutal rape and murder a few years ago. The killer has never expressed any remorse to the girl's family. In her written testimony which she read before the Senate committee, the woman described her feelings towards her daughter's killer in this way: "If you ask if we seek retribution, yes, we do...I, me, want this bully gone. I want him to disappear off the face of the earth. I want him to rot in Hell for all of eternity. He is a bad seed that never should have been born. He is an animal, and when you have an animal that attacks people, you take it to the pound and have it 'put away.'" She ends by saying, "I hope and pray that you will never have to walk in our shoes."⁵ I have never had to walk in her shoes. But I can imagine saying something like that if I were in her shoes. Can you?

Which is easier to forgive or to make a paralytic walk?

Forgiveness can be a painful and awesome activity. That is the first part of the significance of Jesus' question. But what of the second part...after appreciating the difficulty of forgiveness, what should a Christian do with forgiveness? I should warn you (and I should probably have warned you earlier than 15 minutes into this sermon) that I am not going to give you a rock-solid, simple and universal answer to that question. Faithful Christians have genuinely tried to wrestle with the issues and have come to differing conclusions. Better people than I, who have gone through more than I have decided for and against forgiveness. I think that this is one that we all must wrestle with for ourselves. But there are some questions that I think Christians should keep in mind as they wrestle with forgiveness. And that is what I want you to leave you with.

The first set of questions deals with ongoing evil. Does forgiveness entail non-resistance to evil? Should one forgive when that forgiveness allows hurt to self to continue? If someone is beating you up, do you forgive after every swing? Is that what turn the other cheek means? What about when someone else is being hurt? What does Jesus mean when he says, you have heard it said, and eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you do not resist the evil doer?⁶ Does forgiveness enable the spread of evil and pain or restrict it?

The next set of questions deals with a non-repentant person. Should one forgive if the person being forgiven will not repent? Like the case of the man who killed the woman's daughter. What if the person being forgiven cannot repent? For years Christians believed that all people who committed suicide went to hell because killing is a sin and they could not repent because they were dead before they could repent.

⁵ Testimony of Ann Scott to a Senate Committee hearing on the death penalty, Feb 1, 2006.

⁶ Mt 5:38-39

The third set of questions deals with a repentant person. Should one always forgive if the person can and will repent? And what does repentance look like? We have research on the cycle of violence that tends to happen when one spouse abuses another. Often there is a period of building pressure, followed by an explosion, followed by a sincere apology and a promise to never do it again, followed by a honeymoon period, followed by another period of building pressure and explosion. So, what does repentance look like? Surely changing one's ways is as important to repentance as is an emotional apology. How does one know that the other person is truly sorry and will change their actions?

The next set of questions deals with forgiving sins that are committed against someone else. Can one forgive sins that are committed against someone else? Some have argued that we can only forgive sins that are committed against us, the rest we must respond to with justice. But, why are the laws of justice stronger and more universal than the laws of mercy? Why is it that I can identify with victims to the point that it is right for me to carry out the requirements of justice but I cannot identify with victims to the point that it is right for me to carry out the requirements of mercy?

And finally what does our faith have to do with all of this? What do we believe about God? What do we believe about how God forgives? What do we believe about our need for forgiveness? What do we believe about God's feelings about evil? What difference does the story of Jesus have on our beliefs about forgiveness? What does God want for the world, and what does God want from us?

Earlier, I told you that Simon's book had two sections. At the end of the first section, the one where he recounts his story, Simon addresses the reader. He asks the reader to "mentally change places with [him] and ask...the crucial question, 'What would I have done?'" In the second section, a series of people respond to that question. I ask you the same question. What would you have done? And what should you have done? What do you believe as a Christian about forgiveness? As we look to the start of Lent, 10 days from now, I invite you to consider what you believe about forgiveness, and I invite you to talk with others and me about it. It is a central tenant of our faith, one that we are called to live out every day, in our homes, and our places of work, and our places of fun, and it is too important a topic for one person to do all the thinking.

Please pray with me:

God of wisdom, we need you. We need your wisdom, wisdom to know what we ought to do, who we ought to forgive, how we ought to act. God of strength, we need you. We need your strength so that we might not only know what we ought to do, but be able to do what we ought to do. Be with us as we struggle with how to answer your call and live out our faith in this world. And guide us to be ever more the people you call us to be. In your son's name we pray. Amen.