

Epiphany VII

Gen. 45:3-11,15

1 Cor. 15:35-38,42-50

Lk 6:27-39

St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco
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“Do good to those who hate you...forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Amen.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, has defined forgiveness as a fresh start. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting; but it does mean letting go, no longer dwelling on how we have been wronged, and earnestly wanting to rebuild the trust that has been lost.¹ Virtually all of us have felt wronged at some point in our lives, and have needed to take on the hard work of forgiving.

This morning we heard the story of Joseph forgiving his older brothers who had sold him into slavery while he was still a boy. Joseph's story takes many twists and turns, but now he has risen to a position with life or death power over his brothers who have come in desperate need of food. If we were to read the entire story, we would hear that Joseph had treated his brothers quite harshly on their earlier visit to Egypt seeking food, including a false accusation of theft and jail time. Although some might say that he had been testing them in order to see whether they regretted what they had done, which they did express while in prison, I suspect that he also may have been struggling with his own emotions, where years of hurt and anger suddenly had found an opportunity for retaliation.

While treating others as we have been treated may be tempting, especially when we have been wronged, when we act out of our own anger and resentment it only perpetuates more of the same. This is a fatal flaw in an “eye for an eye” understanding of justice, which was pervasive in biblical times and is still with us today. A world of retaliation taken to its limit leads to a Hobbesian existence, a war of all against all where everyone is out for their own selves. In such a world, fear and hatred will win out. Joseph ultimately models a different kind of justice, one that is grounded in compassion, where two wrongs never make things right.

Jesus, too, picked up on the need to break the cycle of retaliation if God's love is ever to transform our hearts, our relationships, and our communities. Both retaliation and not forgiving without a visible sign of repentance were typical in the society of that era. Giving money, goods, or kindness also implied that the giver would expect a tangible reward, or return on investment, rather than giving out of generosity for its own sake.² Jesus' teaching was meant as a standard by which they—and we—should measure the motives of our actions. When we focus on what we are getting in return, we are acting from self-centered interest rather than from what is in the best interest of others. In other words, our behavior shouldn't be determined by what we get, but instead by how we can be agents of God's compassion and goodness.

¹ Tamara Robinson, “Kushner urges forgiveness,” *Clarion*. University of Denver. April 15, 1999, p.8.

² Walter Russell Bowie, *The Gospel According to St. Luke, Exposition Chs.1-6.* In *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol. 8, pp. 1-128. New York: Abingdon Press, 1952, p.123.

Forgiveness in this gospel passage (Lk 6:37) means a loosening or letting go,³ not holding onto grudges, anger, or resentments. It is independent of someone else's repentance. This understanding of forgiveness focuses on our own healing. As Rabbi Kushner points out, forgiveness helps us not let anyone else control our minds or define who we are.⁴

Some years ago, a friend was done a terrible wrong. A few colleagues deliberately and cruelly plotted a character assassination, resulting in him losing his job, his reputation, and career. In his forties, he was forced to relocate from a place he loved. Friendships and relationships were turned upside down, inside out. As time went on, he realized that every waking moment was consumed in anger toward those who had done him wrong. It also hindered his ability to find work. He began to wonder whether the perpetrators were as obsessed with him as he was with them, and he decided that they probably weren't giving him much thought anymore. He asked himself, why was he letting them hold such power over him and continue to destroy him? At that moment, he understood that the only way to release himself was to let go of it all. Putting the situation and their fate into God's hands, he immediately felt his mind and heart open up, restoring his spiritual energy and sense of well-being. Later, when one of the persons who had wronged him also lost his job, he did not feel any joy or vindication, only gratitude to God for no longer being filled with the poison of revenge.

An even more difficult challenge occurred a few years ago when 21-year-old white supremacist Dylan Roof who had appeared at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston during a Wednesday evening prayer service, and was invited to sit and join their group, murdered nine African American parishioners after spending an hour with them as they prayed. At the court hearing two days later, the daughter of one of the victims said, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul." The sister of another victim added, "I acknowledge that I am very angry;" but she said the one thing her sister had always taught in their family was that "we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."⁵ They felt the need to forgive even though Dylann Roof never repented.

Third: Last December Prince Charles spoke at Westminster Abbey about Christians in the Middle East who have suffered profoundly because of their faith. Extremists had forced about 100,000 Christians from the Nineveh area in Iraq, destroying their homes, churches, and community infrastructure. A Dominican nun had spoken to him about the despair they felt when they finally were able to return, but also about how their faith in God had helped them rebuild in that area where Muslims, Christians, and Jews had lived as neighbors and friends for centuries. Prince Charles emphasized that forgiveness "is not a passive act, or submission. Rather, it is an act of supreme courage; [] a refusal to be defined by the sin against you; [an act] of determination that love will triumph over hate. It is one thing to believe in God who forgives; it is quite another to take that example to heart and actually to forgive, with the whole heart, 'those who trespass against you' so grievously."⁶

³ Cf. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Forgiveness," p. 319, in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

⁴ Robinson, p.8.

⁵ Mark Berman, "'I forgive you.' Relatives of Charleston church shooting victims address Dylann Roof," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/?utm_term=.6baec5b369b0.

⁶ "Prince of Wales extols power of forgiveness as he pleads for Christians in the Middle East," Anglican News Service. December 5, 2018. <https://www.anglicannews.org/features/2018/12/prince-of-wales-extols-power-of-forgiveness-as-he-pleads-for-christians-in-the-middle-east.aspx>

Forgiveness and reconciliation: two elements that are central to God's love and to what God calls us to be and do in this world. Forgiveness allows us to become whole. When we seek to act on our resentments, we risk becoming what we have detested most. The power of forgiveness releases life-giving spiritual energy—for us and for those whom we have forgiven. It is the love and compassion that forms the basis of our spiritual life and being, even when we are still hurting.

Yet, if we forgive others, we also need to be able to forgive ourselves. One of the mixed blessings of growing older is having more time to reflect on our lives, including what we might have said or done differently. Part of this reflection brings us to repentance and ultimately the wisdom that we gain. Forgiving ourselves means recognizing our regret, and then committing ourselves to changing how we think and act in the world, and letting go of the old self. The Apostle Paul, who had persecuted early Christians so unmercifully had to be able to forgive himself after converting to Christianity in order to become such a profoundly moving leader in the early church.

“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.” Jesus can't be more explicit in what forgiveness means and what we are called to do. As Rabbi Kushner added, loving another with all their faults is also a way to forgive.⁷ Forgiveness does not mean that we willingly put up with abusive or destructive behavior. It does mean that love and compassion need to be the basis of whatever measures we take to address injustice and restore right relationships. Standing up to injustice, done in a way that is rooted in compassion rather than hatred, will keep our hearts open and humane. Love and compassion have the power to transform hatred and evil, dwelling in us and through us, as a reconciling force in the world.

Forgiveness is a lifelong project. When faced with the next terrible wrong or injustice in our lives, how will each of us choose to respond? Amen.

⁷ Robinson, p.8.