

## **Forgiveness**

II Chronicles 7:12-18  
Matthew 18:21-22

Last Thursday, Hints from Heloise opened with a question: “Have you ever entered a room, only to find you cannot remember why you did?” (Pause). Wait—what was I talking about? Oh...right. Psychologists have termed forgetting why you've gone someplace an “event boundary”. Studies have determined event boundaries have little to do with memory, and more to do with trying to track too many tasks at once. So the next time you forget you were looking for your car keys, forgive yourself.

Forgiveness. Perhaps the only thing sweeter than forgiving someone (including yourself), is being forgiven. Forgiveness heals rifts in relationships. Forgiveness makes long-term commitments possible. No sinner can keep from hurting others. And we are all sinners. But forgiveness is not always easy. We must set aside much to make it happen. We must swallow our pride, calm our fears, choose to forget grievances in order to forgive. (Full disclosure: while I am sometimes slow to forgive I generally do. But there are two men in this world, neither of whom has anything to do with this congregation, whom I have not been able to forgive for harm they have done me. In one case the events causing our rift happened over ten years ago. So please understand that I speak to you as a forgiven sinner. And I am mighty grateful for that forgiveness.)

I confess my guilt. But that is only appropriate, as in theology forgiveness belongs to a sequence of events that must occur *in proper order* for reconciliation to happen. This Lent we preach our way through that sequence. Both Old and New Testaments consistently detail it. The first event that must happen is the sin itself. In order for a break to heal there must first be a break. The next steps are confession and repentance. As we prayed this morning, when we confess our sins we must also repent, turn away from whatever sin we have committed and toward both God and the person whom we have wronged. Most often the process of reconciliation stalls at this first step. But it must happen and it must happen first.

We cannot truly forgive others unless they have confessed their guilt. Put another way, we cannot truly be forgiven unless we have confessed our guilt. But when confession and repentance happen, we can forgive. Even God has covenanted in grace and mercy to forgive us when we follow the process. It appears clear as day in our passage from II Chronicles. Solomon has just completed the construction of the first temple in Jerusalem. The Lord speaks to Solomon. Solomon—who dictated the Chronicles to his scribes—records God said, “if my people...humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will...forgive their sin and heal their land.” Humble themselves describes the act of confession; turning from wicked ways, the act of repentance. God says if you confess and repent I *will* forgive.

At one time the construction of the temple itself would have been a sin. Solomon's father David had longed to build it; God told him not to. Now, one

generation later, God has accepted it as an act of devotion that will promote worship. What constitutes sin can—superficially at least—change over time. I know of a child of this congregation who recently attended a church in another town. As we do, that church escorts children out of the sanctuary a while after the services begin. The woman leading their children's program asked them, “What do people do that God does not want them to do?” Apparently this confused the children, as no one spoke until the adult gave them an example. “You know,” she said, “it's like when two men get married to each other when God clearly tells them that's wrong. Or two women who get married to each other.”

The child from our church held up a hand and said, “I'm not sure I agree with you. My church and my mom and dad always tell me God loves people just the way they are. If a man loves a man or a woman loves a woman I think God would want them to get married.” Now, leaving aside the maturity shown by this child, and also the bravery it took to speak to an unfamiliar adult in an unfamiliar place, let us focus instead on how we have changed what we call sin. A few decades ago, while many people had changed their minds on the question of gay marriage, others considered it a sin. A few decades before that, nobody in any church I was affiliated with would even talk about it. Now we seem to have redefined what is sin, and what is not.

But in fact what constitutes sin has never changed. Sin was, is and always will be intentional action against the will of God. What changes is our understanding of the will of God. What must never change is our determination to sin as little as

possible, to confess and repent when we fail, **and to forgive, forgive freely and repeatedly**. One scholar I read this week spent two and a half pages arguing over whether Jesus, in our passage from Matthew, said we must forgive others seventy-seven, or seven times seventy, times. Finally the learned scholar reached the inevitable conclusion: Jesus meant we must not keep count. We must forgive one another **every time we confess and repent**. After all, God does.

We have spoken often in recent months of the increasing lack of forgiveness in our culture. We have divided into tribes and we have regressed terribly far into demonizing the “other”. Let us, as Christians, confess our sins in this specific area. Let us confess them to God and, when we can find the spiritual maturity to do so, let us confess them to the “others”. And let us then repent, turn away, quit taking hits of the drug of outrage from our dealers in the media and social media. Let us confess our complicity in stretching what was a fissure in our society into a canyon. Let us, as Christians, ask for forgiveness. Let us forgive when others do the same. No matter how other they may seem to us. If we do not take the lead this chasm will never be closed. No healing will happen. And that would be a grievous sin indeed.