

Preaching on Forgiveness

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In thinking about preaching on forgiveness there are many issues to take into account. This article is designed to touch on a number of them. Although I make use of a number of psychological sources in this article, I am convinced that the most important way to interpret forgiveness is theological. The Lord's Prayer reminds us that human forgiveness and God's forgiveness are inseparable. Thus it is important for the preacher to deal with forgiveness theologically and not get side-tracked onto views that are simply psychological or behavioral.

Some years ago I wrote about forgiveness. At the time the book was written I was doing a great deal of counseling with individuals, couples and families who were troubled with family relationships. I found that many of those with whom I worked made explicit use of forgiveness as an interpretive concept for their experience but insisted that they could never forgive the one who had so deeply hurt them. They were unable to respond either to the threats they had heard about what might happen to them if they did not forgive or to the affirmations of how "good for them" forgiveness was. There were others who claimed that they had forgiven the offender, but their forgiveness seemed so easily accomplished that I had difficulty believing them. On a number of occasions I found myself thinking, "I'm sure that I believe in God's forgiveness, but I sometimes wonder if human forgiveness is really possible."

Popular wisdom—what everyone knows or assumes—seems to tell us that forgiveness is a good thing, something a person ought to be able to do and that doing it will be good for them. Some of the popular literature about it is more "preachy" than most preaching. Forgiveness is often proclaimed quite dogmatically as thinking and doing the right thing. When a person learns how to "think right," according to one author, it contributes to proper rest, diet, exercise and other health habits. One author even insists that there is an immutable mental and spiritual law that when there is a health problem, there is a forgiveness problem; therefore, you must forgive if you want to be permanently healed.

"There is nothing unpleasant or embarrassing about the act of forgiveness," says another self-help "preacher" of forgiveness. "In most instances, you need make no outer contact with those involved in your forgiveness act, unless the occasion arises that demands it. The only requirement is that you willingly speak words of forgiveness, and let those words do their cleansing work." "If you have a problem, you have something to forgive. If you experience pain, you have a need to forgive. If you find yourself in unpleasant circumstances, you have a need to forgive. If you find yourself in debt, you have a need to forgive. Where there is suffering, unhappiness, lack, confusion or misery of any sort, there is a need to forgive." That is a pretty extreme statement, but it illustrates how strong convictions about forgiveness can be.

In the years since my book was written, the psychologists seem to have "discovered" forgiveness, and there has been a tremendous amount of psychological literature on the topic. Much of it is interesting to read, and it is written by authors who seem almost as enthusiastic about what forgiveness can do as the self-help writers I mentioned earlier.

One of the major contributors to the psychological research on forgiveness is the Templeton Foundation. Unlike most other funds-granting agencies that support scientific research under a presumption that such research will be objective, the Templeton Foundation has sometimes challenged social scientists to design research that would demonstrate the usefulness of forgiveness, a challenge reminiscent of drug companies who do research on the effectiveness of their own products. I question that as an appropriate strategy for research, but the major psychological disagreement I have with what I have read of the Templeton material is based on my conviction that healing grows out of relationship rather than any particular act that is supposed to be good for you.

Another thing I have noticed in the psychological literature—although again I must say that I have read only a small portion of it—is that much of it ignores the powerful dynamic of shame and its influence on forgiveness. What has been most powerful in the experience of persons I observed struggling with forgiveness is the shame that these persons experienced as a result of the abuse and injustices they had suffered. Shame was not a word that they used to describe what they had experienced. Shame is something that is difficult to acknowledge. What these persons did acknowledge, however, was the fact that they did not feel that they were the same persons they were before the injustice or injury took place. Perhaps the person they were before the injury could have forgiven those who had hurt them, but the person they were afterward was estranged from his or her former identity and, thus, in no position to forgive.

In considering the impact of shame on forgiveness, it is important to note that the shame experienced by persons I worked with in pastoral counseling resulted not only from the personal injury they had experienced, but also from the shame they had incorporated from what they understood their religious tradition to be saying to them. One striking example of this comes from a commentary on the New Testament Gospel of Matthew that is still used for personal religious devotion and study by members of the major Protestant denominations. In his discussion of the Lord's Prayer, the author states:

Jesus says in the plainest possible language that if we forgive others, God will forgive us; but if we refuse to forgive others, God will refuse to forgive us. . . . If we say, "I will never forget what so-and-so did to me," and then go and take this petition on our lips, we are quite deliberately asking God not to forgive us. . . . No one is fit to pray the Lord's prayer so long as the unforgiving spirit holds sway within his heart.¹

Most of my counselees would not have been, in the judgment of this biblical scholar, "fit to pray the Lord's prayer," but, in fact, they did pray it. They believed that forgiveness was important, but they were caught both in the shame of what had happened to them and confirmed in it by what they understood their religious tradition was telling them they must do. They were unable to respond either to the threats they had heard about what might happen to them if they did not forgive or to the affirmations of how "good for them" forgiveness was.

I certainly make no claim to be the kind of New Testament scholar that William Barclay has been, but I believe that in making God's forgiveness of us conditional on our forgiveness of others, he is wrong. To be sure, God's forgiveness and ours are

linked together, but God's forgiving us as we forgive others does not have to be related in a conditional way. The phrase about "forgiving as we are forgiven" appears in the context of a prayer describing the believer's relationship to a God who is understood as a loving and forgiving parent. In relation to such a God, the believer is surprisingly empowered to be forgiving.

Human forgiveness, understood in this theological way, is not primarily something to be done to improve our health or salvation, but an illustration of a quality of life when it is lived in relation to God and one's fellow human beings. Rather, we are enabled to forgive as we are empowered by God's forgiveness of us. This is an issue that is important to consider in thinking about what and how to preach about forgiveness.

The assurance given in Matthew 6:33, that seeking first God's Kingdom and the kind of life associated with it will put all other issues in proper perspective, seems to me to put Jesus' teaching on human forgiveness in the proper relationship to his total message. The announcement of the Kingdom is at the forefront of all that Jesus taught, just as the petition "thy kingdom come" appears before the petition about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.

The familiar phrase "the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you" is most expressive of Jesus' teaching. The kingdom, as it is experienced now, is in the midst of ordinary people, those who hear and see that God's rule is in fact a part of their lives. The Spirit's activity is going on even now in the midst of the ordinary events of life, and finally, God's blessings will be provided in an unpredictable, unexplainable way to just those persons we might have turned away from his banquet. The images of the kingdom as among us and symbolized by the table provide an important context for considering Jesus' specific teaching about human forgiveness.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" should be taken seriously, but not separately. The message about human forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer is not found by extracting from its context the one petition in the prayer that seems to tell us what to do, but in seeing that petition, like the others, as essentially an affirmation of God's relationship to us and a call for our continued relationship with each other. I make no claim that this is the only way to understand the teaching about forgiveness in the New Testament, but I am convinced that what I have said is not inconsistent with the main thrust of that teaching.

A life of faith in the God to whom the Lord's Prayer is addressed can be described theologically as a continual discovery and rediscovery of grace. We do not have to forgive, but sometimes we discover the capacity to forgive in ourselves. Human beings worship God to celebrate that fact. Our forgiveness is not a condition of God's forgiveness, but something enabled by God's relationship to our human lives.

My theory about how human forgiveness sometimes takes place grew out of this theological understanding of forgiveness and from what I observed in the process of pastoral counseling. Most obvious was that fact that it took time, a different amount for different persons and circumstances, but what seemed to be there in all cases was a gradual broadening of the parishioner or patient's focus of concern. No longer was their agenda narrowly focused on the injury they had experienced and the one who had injured them. The frame of their life picture was enlarged, and we dealt with a number of different concerns in their lives. The injury was still there in the picture, but it was placed in relation to other things. Life was going on in spite of it.

Forgiveness, or something like it, seemed to occur in my counselees when they were able to see the people who had injured them as something more than just those who had hurt them. They had healed enough from their injury and shame to look beyond their injury and think about their life beyond it. I became convinced that forgiving was not primarily a behavior, something done or not done, but a process discovered retrospectively after it had already begun to take place within the context of renewed relationships. The theological thesis about this was presented in my book in the following way:

Human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something—that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Although the experience of God’s forgiveness may involve confession of, and the sense of being forgiven for specific sins, at its heart it is the recognition of my reception into the community of sinners—those affirmed by God as his children.²

There is more in that thesis than can be explored in this article, but it is a theological way of saying that forgiveness is most likely to be discovered not in trying to forgive or in being instructed about the process of forgiveness, but in the larger process of overcoming ones hurt and rediscovering who one is beyond the experience of injury and brokenness. The person who stays focused upon whether or not he or she can forgive is not likely to do so.

There are some other things that should be considered about preaching on forgiveness. Because of the circumstances of my clinical practice and my own choice, I had not dealt at all with the physical violence or sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers or by family members. Moreover, much of the literature on such abuse makes it clear how the demands for forgiveness by those who have been so victimized can itself be abusive.

An illustration of this comes from Karen Olio, a psychotherapist in an article that is a response to the statement in a children’s book that insists that the abused child must forgive the father who abused her. Olio argues instead that such insistence on forgiveness “contributes to the re-victimization of survivors, who for so long were forced to conform to an external version of reality, by insisting the path to wholeness and freedom can only be found by adopting one particular way of thinking and feeling toward the abuser.”³

She challenges this “one way” forgiveness by noting its presumption that the victim’s judgment must be suspended. She argues the contrary that, in fact, judgments offer a significant contribution to the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse. She comments that the “defense mechanisms, denial and dissociation, which are developed to cope with the emotionally overwhelming and physically over-stimulating abuse experiences, render survivors particularly susceptible to the suggestion that forgiveness is a necessary step toward resolution of the abuse trauma.”

It is “no doubt crucial for resolution of the trauma that survivors be able to view the abuser as a human being, and that they not depersonalize him or her in the same manner that they themselves were depersonalized.” But, she insists, compassion and forgiveness “are optional.” Olio denies the argument of the recovery movement and

12-step programs that taking responsibility for forgiveness is an important part of an abused person's empowerment. Instead, she argues that survivors, "who already must struggle with the feelings of self-blame caused by the abuse," should not have to take on the further blame of not being able to forgive.

In another treatment of human forgiveness after abuse, Sidney and Suzanne Simon argue (as I did in *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*) that forgiveness is a discovery.⁴ It is the by-product of an ongoing healing process. Failure to forgive is not a failure of will. Instead, people are unable to forgive because wounds have not yet healed. Forgiveness is not something done (i.e., a behavior). It is something that happens as a sign of positive self-esteem, when the victim is no longer building his or her identity around something that happened in the past. The injury is not all of who one is, but rather a part of life that has at least started to move out of the center of the frame.

A fascinating example of how uncritical assumptions about the value of forgiveness can be a problem comes from an article that I have used for many years in discussions of forgiveness. A Texas pastor, Richard P. Lord, wrote about his experience in being called upon to deal with the situation of a woman whose sons were killed and who herself was shot and left for dead by an unknown group of men who broke into her house. One of the men later wrote her from prison saying that he had "found Christ" and asked her to forgive him. She asked her pastor, "Am I obligated as a Christian to forgive in this situation? Just what does the church mean by 'forgiveness'?" He did not say, "I'm sorry. . . just forgive me."⁵

In the pastor's answer to the question, he identifies two problems in forgiving: forgiveness as forgetting and forgiveness as excusing. With respect to forgetting, he comments, "When we forgive someone, it usually implies that we will try to act as though nothing has happened. Can we do this without showing massive disrespect for the victim of violence when those close to him or her are deeply concerned that their loved one not be forgotten?" With respect to excusing, he asks the question, "If an abuser has a religious experience after the abuse has taken place, does this mean that 'now we should act as though a crime wasn't committed?'"

And, in reflecting on his proclamation in worship, "Your sins are forgiven," Pastor Lord imagines a battered wife thinking, "Who gave you the right to forgive the one who beats me?" As a consequence of this reflection, he argues that forgiveness cannot be "a commodity that can be handed out" by the church or anyone else, and he concludes that pastors and other well-intentioned Christians "have no right to insist that the victim establish a relationship with his or her victimizer to effect a reconciliation."

Pastor Lord's answer to his parishioner was based on an understanding of repentance as involving three conditions: remorse, restitution and regeneration. None of the three was evidenced in the prisoner who said he had "found Christ." Thus, the pastor concluded that to "offer forgiveness when these conditions are not met is not gracious. It is sacrilegious." His answer to the victim was, "No." She did not have to forgive.

Almost more striking than the original article were the negative responses that it stirred up among *The Christian Century's* readers.⁶ One example that is typical of others said, "How can I be a Christian and refuse to forgive? ... If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you. I cannot call myself a Christian and refuse to forgive others or hope to have my sins forgiven."

The issues that arise with forgiveness after abuse and violence are important in reminding preachers and other well-meaning Christians that expecting or demanding forgiveness from someone can itself be abusive. Their work has also emphasized that forgiveness, if it takes place, should be a part of a broader healing process, not an isolated event.

Theologically most helpful in my more recent understanding of forgiveness is Gregory Jones' view of forgiveness as embodied within Christian living. Forgiveness should not be understood apart from that larger concept. In describing the kind of life of which forgiveness is a part, he uses the image of learning a craft. Just as Aristotle emphasized the importance of learning a "craft" for learning how to live, Jones argues that there is a craft of forgiveness which Christians are called upon to learn from one another.⁷⁷ The craft of forgiveness involves the ongoing and ever-deepening process of learning to live in communion with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation.

As one who has been learning how to play music again after a recess of 35 or so years, I find Jones' image of learning a craft to be a powerful one. I practice on my piano or saxophone so that later I can play the music almost without thinking. When my craft is learned well enough, I can feel where a note is to be played with my hand without a conscious decision about it. Through practice I become less awkward, and music becomes a part of me. The craft becomes a part of the person one is, not just what one does.

The religious life as the Christian tradition describes it is an ongoing communal activity of learning to live into the forgiveness that characterizes our relation to God. My way of saying this has been that it is a discovery in the process of living in spite of the brokenness that I, or another, have created or have been responsible for. Although much of my concern over the years has been with human forgiveness, human and divine forgiveness cannot be separated theologically. I am committed to the view that we forgive as we are forgiven. God is a part of any forgiveness we give or receive. Understanding forgiveness as a part of the Christian life reminds us that forgiving is not something that we have the power to do or are righteous in doing. Rather, it is a description of the nature of our now and to come kingdom relationship to God and to each other. Like God's kingdom, forgiveness is something that is discovered to be "in the midst of us," as a part of our "neighbor-hood" with each other. Again, the New Testament image that most powerfully expresses it is the messianic banquet, where strange dinner companions sit side by side at a common table. Their differences are obvious, but seated at the same table, they are able to see how much they are like each other.

If one believes that forgiveness is an authentic and central element in Jesus' teaching about the Christian life, it would seem to follow that preaching and pastoral care should involve the guidance of persons in how they should forgive. The understanding of human forgiveness as something discovered rather than something done, however, suggests that direct guidance in forgiving is, in effect, turning that forgiveness, theologically, into a work or achievement, and psychologically, into a behavioral technique of reducing the pain of self injury.

The implication of forgiveness understood as discovery rather than act is that preaching and pastoral care are not so much helping persons with forgiveness as with the pain of being themselves. They are concerned to help persons break through the

isolation of shame and rejection, thus freeing them from their need to view themselves as victims. It is from the position of being an ordinary, responsible human being that the discovery of forgivingness in oneself becomes possible. Like those who have studied the creative process have found, we are more likely to discover something when we are not trying to prove anything.

The function of church and ministry is not to supervise acts of forgiveness, but to provide relationships in which genuine humanity, including the possibility that I am forgiving, can be discovered. Human forgiveness is something more likely to be discovered when the pastor is not trying to help someone do it. When I can recognize what is like me, ie., neighbor-hood, in another, I have either forgiven that person or discovered that forgiveness as something done is not the main point anyway.

Some of the books that have been helpful to me in my continuing study of the process of forgiveness are:

Helping People Forgive by David W. Augsburger (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox, 1996)

Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis by L. Gregory Jones, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996)

The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies, by Robert J. Schreiter, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books., 1998)

An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics by Donald W Shriver Jr. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation by Miroslav Volf (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Notes

1 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew 1* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 223-24.

2 John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2003), 16.

3 Karen Olio, "Recovery From Sexual Abuse: Is Forgiveness Mandatory?" *Voices* 28 (1992): 73-74, 1992.

4 Sidney and Suzanne Simon, *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get On with Your Life* (New York: Warner Books 1990).

5 Richard P. Lord, "Do I Have to Forgive? Personal Perspective," *The Christian Century* 108 (October 9, 1991): 902-903.

6 "Readers' Response," *The Christian Century*, 108 (November 20-27, 1991): 1126.

7 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), xii.