

# **To Err is Human to Forgive . . . .**

**Katie Vigil, August 16, 2009**

I was going to call this sermon The “F” word. In fact I told a number of people that was the title. Everyone asked me what the word was and I asked them to guess. So how many of you would have guessed the word to be faith? That was the number one guess I got from people.

Surprisingly, only one person guessed the real word and yes it is definitely a word you can say in church -- forgiveness. Now I’ll bet that when you think about forgiveness, you think about the line from the Lord’s prayer in Matthew’s gospel, “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

You may have been told that the prayer means you are forgiven only as much as you forgive. You may have heard inspirational quotes about how forgiveness frees you and allows you to move on. One of my favorite quotes about forgiveness used to be that is the scent the violet sheds on the heel that crushed it. It all almost makes you want to say, “ah”

Has anyone really experienced forgiveness like that? I believe that a much more realistic description of forgiveness is that it is GUT WRENCHING.

The very fact that you have to forgive someone means that some bad act preceded the forgiveness and that the bad act happened to you or someone you love.

These bad acts can range from anything to the smallest hurt all the way up to the most painful betrayal or unfaithfulness you’ve ever experienced.

So you had to have been hurt or betrayed or humiliated, maybe by a stranger who cut you off in traffic, or by a co-worker who ignores you or gossips about you, or by a good friend who talked about you behind your back, or by a loved one who cheated on you. You can be hurt by someone you know well, or a family member, or by a complete stranger who turns your world upside down. And then after you’ve been hurt by that person, you’re supposed to forgive him or her. It is GUT WRENCHING.

Phillip Yancy in his book, *What’s So Amazing about Grace*, describes forgiveness as “achingly difficult”, and as unnatural, unfair, and undeserved. Earlier this year, I led a class on this book about grace, much of the book was also necessarily about forgiveness. We watched videos about horrible ordeals that ordinary people had to suffer and then learned how those people forgave their perpetrators and prayed for them. We read about some of the most heinous things people have done and continue to do to one another and how ordinary people forgave them and prayed for them. We shook our heads in disbelief and asked ourselves, can we forgive like that?

We’re told to do that, as Christians. It’s right there in the Lord’s prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Did Jesus really mean to put that “as” in the prayer.

I looked up the word forgive in the bible; it is mentioned 116 times from the beginning to the end. So many passages that tell us to forgive so we can be forgiven, some very disturbing. Hear these words from Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"<sup>22</sup> "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven! *Jesus then tells the story of the king who decides to bring his accounts up to date. So he plans to sell a servant along with his family because he owes the king so much money. But after the servant begs for mercy the king forgives his debt. This same servant who has been forgiven sees another servant who owes him a little bit of money and demands that he pay. When the second servant cannot pay and begs for mercy the first servant throws him in jail. Witnesses to this action get very upset and tell the king what happened.* <sup>32</sup> Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me.'<sup>33</sup> Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'<sup>34</sup> Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

If forgiveness is unnatural and unfair and undeserved, why do we have to do it? Why did God tell us to do it? We know why, it is because we are called to live a different life as Christians.

It is because God forgives all; no matter how horrific the crime, the act, the sin, God will forgive the sinner if asked. I doubt anyone can forgive everyone for every bad thing they have ever done, but we should be trying. In fact it is in trying that we can fulfill God's purpose for us. We are told that we are made in God's image so we have to try to be like God - a God who can forgive.

When we are faced with the choice of what to do when we are hurt, how do we really deal with it.

A lot of the time we put conditions on our forgiving someone; is that person really sorry about what he or she did, did I get an apology, am I encouraging bad behavior, that person needs to know that there are consequences. If all these conditions are met then maybe I can forgive. And, if I forgive shouldn't I be praised.

The problem here is that we confuse forgiveness with justice. It's not our job to dispense justice, that will come from our legal system or from God. By forgiving someone we are not pardoning them; that person will still deserve some form of just punishment which they may or may not get, but it's not relevant to our act of forgiving. By forgiving someone you are not condoning what was done.

Another difficult concept to understand about forgiveness is that it is undeserved – it is a gift from God – there for the taking and available to everyone. Forgiveness is the reason God sent his son Jesus to earth – to die for our sins so that we are forgiven. It is really easy to forget that in our day to day living. How many times do we encounter little hurts each day? We are ignored, snubbed, yelled at, treated badly by strangers, by friends, by co-workers, by family. Are we supposed to forgive every hurt? We are. Seventy times seven!

It is easy to forget about forgiveness in the larger world when we hear the news every day. How do we forgive the terrorists who bombed the towers on 9/11? I remember attending a church service the night after it happened. The minister was going around the congregation with a microphone asking people to speak. One girl,

a high school student, was crying. She stood and said that we also needed to forgive the people who did this and pray for them. The negative reaction to these words was very vocal. And this was a room full of Christians who learned all about forgiveness but they were crying out for unforgiveness. I'm sure many of them were thinking, this is too big, too terrible - this is unforgivable.

But we learned in class that everything bad and every sinner can be forgiven, no matter how big the sin. We learned about horrible things that happened during World War II and then we would look at each other across the table and be in awe over those who were able to forgive and pray for the people who hurt them.

We learned about crimes that happened to people, one woman who was kidnapped at 16, held for 3 days, repeatedly raped and how she learned to forgive everything that happened to her.

We learned about others who suffered discrimination, who were ostracized, who were hurt over and over again by abusive or addicted family members. And we watched them struggle with the concept of forgiveness.

Another myth about forgiveness is that once you forgive you will magically feel so much better, No, remember it's GUT WRENCHING. You just want to cry out, "it's so unfair! You remember the story of Joseph in the old testament. How his brothers sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead. Eventually, Joseph reaches high stature in Egypt and has been reunited with his brothers and with Jacob, his father. "<sup>15</sup> In Genesis 50:15-17, it says, "But now that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers became fearful. "Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him," they said. <sup>16</sup> So they sent this message to Joseph: "Before your father died, he instructed us <sup>17</sup> to say to you: 'Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did to you—for their sin in treating you so cruelly.' So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin." When Joseph received the message, he broke down and wept." He had forgiven them. Was he crying out at the difficulty of this forgiveness? – it is GUT WRENCHING.

Our class asked over and over, how do we forgive like that? I don't know that I had an answer, but we began to become very aware of all the unforgiveness in the world, we are surrounded by it. That's the only alternative to forgiveness – a world of unforgiveness and it is truly ugly. I began collecting articles and stories about unforgiveness.

Here is a story about an Iranian woman who was blinded by a stalker; he threw acid in her face. Then he turned himself in to the police. The woman wants him to be sentenced to blinding by acid also. That is the only punishment she will accept.

Here's a story about a pastor in New Hampshire who agreed to take in a convicted child killer who served his time but had nowhere to go. What was the reaction? The neighbors wanted to burn his house down; they became a mob. Does that child killer deserve forgiveness? Maybe not, but that's not the criterion for forgiveness, it is undeserved. When we commit sins and wrongs against other people, do we deserve forgiveness? But we get it in the form of Jesus.

And finally here is a letter to the editor of the Rocky Mountain News from May of this year. This writer is from Highlands Ranch. He has written to the editor before that he believes the death penalty is too expensive and time consuming but now he

writes in reaction to a horrible crime committed by a man on an 8 month old child. "The crime is so vicious, so depraved, as to merit only the ultimate punishment. And I'm not talking about lethal injection. Lethal injection is something we do to our beloved pets when their suffering becomes too much for us to bear. No, this person, upon conviction, should be dragged to a conspicuous public location and set on fire. If nobody else has the stomach for it, I volunteer to strike the match. God is truly dead." This letter left us speechless. This is what a world of unforgiveness looks like. We don't want to be like this man. And so we have to try to learn how to forgive and to pray for those who hurt us.

In October of 2000 my younger brother was killed in a boating accident. He was in Oregon on a 6 month job as a mechanical engineer. He had befriended someone from work and had gone fishing with him a couple of times – my brother loved to fish. It turns out that the man was on probation from countless DUIs. He took my brother out on a boat in which the life jackets were locked away. It was about 10 in the morning but he was already drinking. They were on the Gold river but then the man decided to take the boat over the bar into the ocean. It was very stormy on the ocean and the boat broke apart. My brother was killed; the other man survived. We learned all of these ugly details later; that he was not supposed to drink or drive or operate a boat, that his father tried to cover up the fact that he had been drinking that morning. The loss of my brother was so devastating to my family, I watched my parents' grief at losing a third son, and it was almost unbearable. Eventually the man pled to manslaughter and was imprisoned. A few months later he sent the family a letter saying that he was sorry and asking for our forgiveness. My relatives were angry and asked the DA in Oregon to tell this man that we didn't want to hear from him. But by then I knew I had to forgive him. At first I tried to rationalize it; he was an alcoholic so he was impaired, he didn't mean for my brother to die, he's sorry. In the end none of that mattered, I had to forgive so I could continue to heal over the loss of my brother. I let go – I left the justice to the authorities in Oregon and to God. And this morning before my sermon I prayed for this man. GUT WRENCHING Did he deserve forgiveness, not for me to say. It is undeserved, I know that God forgave him. It is what we are called to do.

"Forgiveness" said Dr. Martin Luther King is not just an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude. What greater gift could Christians give to the world than the forming of a culture that upholds grace and forgiveness."

Please pray with me. Merciful and loving God who sent us Jesus to embody forgiveness, who sent Jesus to die so we could be forgiven. Give us the strength and the courage to forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.