3-11-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 18:21-35 Foolish Love…Forgives Lenten Series

..The Sunday school teacher’s lesson for the day was forgiveness. She began with a question:

“What do you have to do in order to be forgiven?” One little hand shot up. This boy was certain he had the answer. He said, “In order to be forgiven, you’ve got to sin!”

-Sandy Wylie “Humans Before God” 1-20-12 ministrymatters.com

For most of us, sinning is not a problem. We sin every time that we behave or act in such a way contrary to God’s ways, damaging relationships between God and us, between someone else and us, or between creation and us. Once those relationships are damaged, however, the only way to repair such relationships is through the grace of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the act of letting go, or giving up resentment, of pardoning another or granting relief from payment.

Forgiveness is a concept that we like on paper, but often find very hard to put into daily practice. We want to be forgiven by God, yet have a hard time forgiving others. We know that Christ calls us to forgive those who have wronged us, but the practice of forgiveness runs counter to our human nature.

William Willimon once wrote:

"The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities.

It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue."

-Pulpit Resource. Vol.24, No.3, Year A, 1996, page 44,

As quoted by Richard Fairchild, rockies.net

Who do you find easier to forgive—a terrorist halfway around the world, or a good friend across the street? I have found that the farther removed I am personally from a person or experience, the easier it is for me to forgive. Conversely, however, the closer I am to a person

who has wronged me or wronged my family, the harder it is for me to forgive. Seeing them in the midst of everyday life keeps open my wounds of hurt or sorrow. Seeing them in the midst of everyday life forces me to make a choice of when and how often I will live by forgiveness. Seeing them in the midst of everyday life continually reminds me that I have been forgiven much by God, then calls me to forgive others in response to God’s grace for me.

How easy it is to make a list of those who have wronged us—those who have lied to us, judged us, hurt us, bullied us, mistreated us, sinned against us. How easy it is to think of daily struggles with others at home, in the workplace, even here at church.

If we were to each make a list right now of individuals, government officials, corporations, and even nations who have hurt us, we could spend the rest of worship writing down our lists.

But what if we were to write down instead everyone who has ever forgiven us—how long would that list be? And beside each person’s name who has forgiven us, what litany of sins and wrongdoings would we list that we have personally been forgiven of?

What if we were to write down a list of all our sins that God has forgiven? Could we even begin to list every sin and transgression that God through Christ has wiped clean from our record of sin?

As we journey during this Lenten season ever closer to the cross, and through the cross to the empty tomb, we are reminded once again today that God’s foolish love for us forgives. That is the message of the cross. That is the good news of the cross. Because of God’s great love for us,

our sins are forgiven. Through God’s love in Christ Jesus, our relationship with God has been restored. God has let go of our past, in order to offer us a new future.

Then, in response to such forgiving love, we are called to forgive one another. We are called to forgive ourselves. We are called to model the forgiveness we have received from God in our relationships with others. This is true in the midst of our daily lives, in our homes and at our workplaces, and this is also true within the community of faith we call the church.

At one point when Jesus was teaching his disciples Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Jesus, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? As many as seven times?”

Note that Peter here is not asking about forgiveness for the stranger down the street, even though forgiveness applies to strangers, friends and family members alike. No, Peter here is asking about brothers and sisters, fellow believers, and in the context of Matthew’s first hearers, other members of the church.

“Jesus, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? As many as seven times?”

Peter believes he is being generous by saying seven. The rabbis at the time taught “three strikes and you’re out.” If you had already forgiven a brother or sister 2 or 3 times, then the next time they were in need of forgiveness you could sever the relationship or even seek vengeance.

Nowadays, in our quick-to-judge world, where society seeks to set up an us-verses-them mentality, many people refuse to forgive even the first sin, let alone the third or seventh or seventy-seventh.

While we may not keep a checklist of sins against us, even at the first offense we are out the door, looking for new relationships, rather than spend the time, energy and grace to work on current relationships.

No relationship is perfect. No relationship will be without sin and the need for forgiveness. This is true in our families, as well as in the family of the church.

I have known church members who got mad and left after the first slight, and I have known church members who have experienced deep hurt and yet have forgiven one another. That forgiveness does not mean they are close friends. It only means that they can be in the same room together, and even on occasion work together, because they focus not on the hurt

but on their common faith in Christ.

Jesus moves beyond the legalism of three strikes to God’s grace in his response to Peter.

“Seven? Hardly. Try seventy-seven, or seventy times seven.”

77? 70x7? 490? Who will keep track of such a large number of sins? Who will spend the time and energy remembering and counting sins? Sadly, there are men and women who would and do keep such a record of wrongdoing, keeping a tally of wrongs, and at 3 or 7 or 77 or 490 or some other number will say, “Stop! Your time is up. I’ve had enough of your wrongdoing. I am done forgiving you.”

Jesus says, stop doing such math. Stop keeping such a checklist. That is a transactional way of life, not a relational way of life. A transactional life is back and forth payment, the way of the world. A relational life is back and forth forgiving grace, the way of God.

..Christian Schwarz likes to share the story of Pastor Uwe Holmer from Berlin. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the government of East Germany crumbled, the man responsible for building the wall, Erich Honecker, was deposed as Communist head of state and literally left homeless. The Holmer family took in the ex-dictator and his wife and was greatly criticized for the action.

Again and again Pastor Holmer explained they did not take them in out of sympathy for the old system. They, too, had been affected by the Communist regime when eight of their ten children applied for admission to high school, which would qualify them for a college education, and all eight were turned down because their family had church affiliations.

Pastor Holmer took in the Honeckers because of his Christian conviction of hospitality, and was surprised to find himself holding no grudge against the man who had caused so much suffering in the nation.

Pastor Holmer said, “I was surprised at myself. When they arrived on my doorstep my past anger toward the government was suddenly gone. For years it has been the forgiveness of my Lord that has sustained me. I know that my Lord wants me to forgive others. When you’re lived under forgiveness for a long time, it’s not so terribly hard to forgive others.”

-3 Colors of Love, p. 100

Pastor Holmer had learned how to forgive others as he received forgiveness from the Lord. And he knew that forgiveness had nothing to do with Mr. Honecker and everything to do with his own relationship with the Lord.

I must admit that I would be hard pressed to offer such forgiveness if I were in his shoes. I have trouble feeling any sympathy for terrorists who seek to hurt innocent people. I have trouble forgiving those who have hurt me or those who have spoken against my family. I have trouble inwardly not judging the actions of others. I have to continually remember that the person with whom I struggle is also a beloved and forgiven child of God. Forgiveness is as challenging for me as it may be for you today.

Then each service of worship I am confronted with the Lord’s Prayer. You know the phrase we pray each week, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do you realize this is the only conditional phrase in the entire prayer? This is the only line in the entire prayer where a gift from God is contingent on our response. As we forgive others, God forgives us. Yet when we refuse to forgive others, we refuse to accept God’s forgiveness of us.

When we accept God’s love and hope, forgiveness and grace, those attributes of God, those foundations of faith, ought to change us. When we refuse to allow them to change us, in essence we are refusing these gifts of faith.

Jesus’ next words to Peter and the disciples were a parable to reflect this struggle of allowing God’s forgiveness to change us. Jesus tells a parable about a servant who owed his king 10,000 talents, which would absurdly translate into wages equivalent to 150,000 years work. The servant, his family, and his possessions were to be sold to pay off a portion of his debt, yet the servant begged for mercy and was granted forgiveness of his debt by the king. Yet that same servant, after having been surprisingly forgiven by his king, turned around and demanded payment from a fellow servant who owed him only 100 days wages. When that fellow servant begged for mercy, this unforgiving servant threw him in jail until the debt could be paid. When the king heard that the one he had forgiven had not forgiven another, the king was furious, and the unforgiving servant received his original punishment.

Once again, the servant tried to live by a transactional life rather than a relational life. Yet God calls us to be in relation with God, with one another and with ourselves, to live by love and forgiveness and grace. As God has forgiven us we are called to forgive one another.

Yet in the act of letting go of the past, in the choice to pardon another, forgiveness is not pretending that a wrong did not occur or holding someone back from suffering the consequences of our actions. Forgiveness is not condoning abuse or allowing others to continue to take advantage of you. Forgiveness is not mere words saying, “I’m sorry” or even the absence of pain. Instead, forgiveness recognizes that we have been wronged and hurt and violated. Forgiveness takes sin seriously, yet does not allow that sin or its emotional consequences to control our lives forever.

Rev David Lose once said:

..Forgiveness, you see, is ultimately a decision about the past – the decision to accept both that you cannot change the past and also that the past does not have to hold you captive. Forgiveness is a decision about the past that ultimately determines the future. When you forgive, you release the past and enter into an open future. When you cannot forgive, you remain captive to that past until the end of time. Forgiveness, in this sense, is freedom,

freedom from the past, freedom for the future, the kind of freedom God wants for each of us.

-“Forgiveness and Freedom” 9-7-14 davidlose.net

Forgiveness is telling the hurt of the past that it no longer controls you. Forgiveness is opening yourself up to a new future, influenced by yet not controlled by the past.

Describing forgiveness, Stephanie Dowrick writes, “As challenging as it is, forgiveness may be the supreme virtue, for it declares: I will attempt to go on loving the life in you, or the divine in you or the soul in you, even when I totally abhor what you have done or what you stand for.

What’s more, I will attempt to see you as my equal, and your life as having equal value to my own, even when I despise what you do and everything you stand for.”

-Homileticsonline.com, 1999

“Years after her concentration camp experiences in Nazi Germany, Corrie ten Boom met face to face one of the most cruel and heartless German guards that she had ever contacted. He had humiliated and degraded her and her sister. He had jeered at them as they stood in the delousing shower. Now he stood before her with hand outstretched and said, “Will you forgive me?” She writes: “I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus, help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother,’ I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!” To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.”

-Illustrations Unlimited, p. 218

..Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012 – an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him.

But then she made the choice to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors,"

she told The Forgiveness Project. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then became a process."

At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world.

--“Forgiveness Fitness” 9-17-17 homileticsonline.com

What has forgiveness looked like in your life? Has it come easy, or has it been a daily choice to forgive again? Has it included the full restoration of a relationship, or has it meant the end of a relationship in order to set protective boundaries, all the while learning to move beyond the pain?

Are you willing to accept God’s forgiveness in your life today? Are you willing to forgive yourself today of past shame and hurt, of past mistakes and sins?

Are you willing to make a choice to forgive another who has hurt you, to no longer allow their actions or attitudes to control what you do or say or think?

Forgiveness is a choice, and forgiveness is a process, and forgiveness is one of the hardest Christian virtues to live by in a divisive world today.

The good news is that we do not offer forgiveness to ourselves or others by our own strength.

As God has forgiven us, God also gives us God’s strength to forgive others. So as you go forth today to struggle with forgiveness in your own life, know that you do not go alone. God is with us.

And remember that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The forgiveness we offer to others is the forgiveness we have received through God’s foolish love shown on the cross.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.”