

“Building a Strong FAMILY of God – Ask for and Offer Forgiveness”

October 3, 2021

World Communion Sunday and CROP Walk

Most of us probably have a story about forgiveness. Maybe it's a time when we've been forgiven for pain we've caused or a wrong we've done. Maybe it's a moment when we forgave someone else for pain they caused us. As we're thinking about what it means to be "family" - regardless of how we're connected, forgiving one another is something we have to deal with.

Sometimes it's personal; sometimes it's a wrong done to a whole group. Whether we're on the asking for or offering end, forgiveness is foundational to our faith in Jesus Christ and vital to relationships with others. God created us for connection and community. We can't avoid talking about forgiveness as we consider how to strengthen our family life together at home and in the church, and we shouldn't.

Some of our stories of forgiveness may be difficult to share because of the pain involved. Some of the stories may be examples of God's grace that have transformed lives. When I think of forgiveness stories, big stories come to mind like the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania who offered forgiveness for a school shooter or the church family at Mother Emanuel AME Church who stood in a courtroom and spoke words of forgiveness to a hate-filled man who sat in a Bible study class and then killed nine parishioners, I hear myself say, "I don't know how they can do it. I don't know if I could." We've graded forgiveness based on the situation, and some of us may even have ideas about what we consider "unforgivable."

Writer Roberta Bondi tells of an incident in her young life when a Sunday School classmate took a brand-new silver crayon from her brand-new box of crayons and broke it - pretty much on purpose. The classmate was upset that Roberta was getting all the attention. The teacher did what we might do - made the classmate apologize and then made Roberta speak words of forgiveness - citing Jesus' words about forgiving others if you want God to forgive you.

Yes, Jesus' words are there, but I'm convinced that Jesus includes forgiveness in this model prayer because he knows that it's constant work for us, hard work for us, even daily work for us. Bondi writes about her story: "I am sure...that it is the source of an awful lot of our unhelpful and unrealistic adult beliefs about forgiveness." Bondi's experience reminds us that there are times when we've made forgiveness too simplistic. We've made it sound like an easy road filled with meaningless platitudes, rather than

the difficult journey that it can be.

Jesus addresses forgiveness multiple times in his ministry, including in his foundational teaching. As Jesus offers a way to pray, he claims his authority and invites us to see ourselves differently in relationship to God and to each other - "Our Father." We are God's children, called to follow. Jesus prays for God's name to be hallowed, God's will to be done, and God's kingdom to come—and for strength to carry out the commands Jesus gives earlier on in the sermon, even to forgive rather than being vengeful.

This prayer that Jesus offers the disciples is a way of understanding prayer and connection to God and each other. When I pray these words, it goes beyond God and me. One person calls it a "community empowerment prayer." This is about who we are together - and who God calls us to be together.

Jesus teaches us to honor God and yearn for God's reign. We're called to rely on God's daily providence - give us enough for today. We're called to seek God's forgiveness and forgive others. Ask for and offer forgiveness - that's a part of how we build a strong family of God.

I wish Jesus would've stopped at "forgive us" and didn't add the part about forgiving others. I can ask for forgiveness, but forgiving others is hard. Sometimes that phrase even gets caught in my throat in those moments when I'm struggling with forgive. Author Philip Yancey writes, "When I'm wronged, I can find a number of reasons against forgiveness." Me, too!

And don't forget Jesus' words about forgiveness to Peter. It's a math question in Scripture. "How many times do I have to forgive someone who wrongs me?" We can debate it – 77 times or 70 times 7. In the end, the point is that we lose count. Forgiveness is that important.

It's important because we need it - each of us. All of us have sinned - by what we've done or left undone. We've hurt each other. We've harmed God's good creation. We've grieved God's heart. Our thoughts, words, and deeds have not been holy, and we need forgiveness. We are made in God's image, but we also stray from God. Admitting that isn't wallowing in our sin; it's being honest about our need for God's grace and knowing that forgiveness is possible.

The Good News is that grace is God's free gift - and makes forgiveness possible. We talk a good game, but do we really believe that? Some of us are walking around carrying a burden of un-forgiveness for someone else and maybe even for ourselves - not believing that God can and will forgive us. If we've hurt someone, God's forgiveness may not restore a broken relationship with that person, but God loves us and offers forgiveness when we come in faith and trust in the gift of Jesus' love shown on the

cross. We're not defined by the worst, but by God's love and amazing grace.

And if we start there - with our honest confession and our need of forgiveness, and then embracing God's gift of love, we can't stop there because Jesus didn't stop there. God calls us to forgive us others. Jesus isn't saying that forgiveness is easy. It's not. Forgiveness isn't fair either - and many times it doesn't do anything to settle blame. So why bother?

Forgiveness requires vulnerability on our part - admitting that someone hurt us or that we hurt someone - and that's hard to do. When trust is broken, it's painful, and vulnerability and honesty open us up wide. No one loves to be vulnerable. It forces us to deal with the bitterness, resentment, and anger that we carry - and it's a burden that can truly weigh us down. Hurt and pain can begin to define us, but forgiveness (not quick and easy), can offer a release for the desire for retaliation and revenge.

The most common word used for forgiveness means to release, hurl away, or free yourself. In a famous word on forgiveness, author Lewis Smedes says, "When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us." This image describes Smedes' quote for me. **SLIDE:** Image of chains and birds

There's freedom in forgiveness. It's not allowing for injustice to continue or saying everything's fine or simply forgetting about the pain, but forgiveness does entrust the situation to God so that we're not carrying the burden of un-forgiveness, which is so destructive and can keep us from trusting others and finding life-giving relationships. Many times, the person who wronged us doesn't even seem to know or care, but we're still clinging to the pain. Carrying that burden can keep us from the true joy of God's forgiveness for ourselves, too.

Forgiveness is not necessarily forgetting and moving on, but maybe we should remember so that the cycle of pain isn't repeated and moving forward is possible. Forgiveness seeks to really treat others and love others as we've been loved by God. What might it be like to pray for those whom you're struggling to forgive? How could we release them into God's care and God's will instead of trying to carry the hurt alone?

The good news is that we have a choice. Seeking to forgive is not being weak, but relying on God's strength and God's justice. The good news is that we have help at every step. We can allow our faith in Christ to show in how we deal with one another. Does it mean that we'll be best friends with those who mistreat us? No! That's not the promise or the goal. It means we let God fight for us instead of trying to fight a battle that can only bring more hurt and pain. It offers us freedom from what keeps us bound.

The good news is that God is big enough – and God's grace is wide enough – that we can offer ourselves honestly to God. The Creator of the universe is able to receive us as we are. And when we're honest, God can bring healing. Our willingness to share those

real feelings is an act of faith in God who can help us to seek forgiveness. It may not come quickly, but it will never come without trying.

And asking for and offering forgiveness will change us. It forces us to deal with ourselves and our ego. And it forces us to realize that God in Christ who could respond to us without forgiveness, chooses to respond with love and grace that saves us and makes us new. There's another time when Jesus speaks forgiveness - when he's showing agape love - sacrificial love - on the cross. This is the Holy One who says "Father, forgive them...for they know not what they do."

That's who God is – the One who forgives – and invites us to receive that grace that helps us to be honest, work on forgiveness even as we pray as Jesus taught, and find release from un-forgiveness.

Whose forgiveness do you long for? If it God's forgiveness, know that it's available to you. If it's forgiveness from someone else, you can lift it to God in prayer for peace.

Whom do you need to forgive? Pray for them - for God's will to be done in their lives, for God's care for them. It's hard work and deep work, but important work because it's who we are together.

What a gift to come to the table where we find grace. It's a place where we're welcome and a place that reminds us of love poured out for us on the cross - the love of Jesus to make us new and give us hope, peace, joy - and to send us out into the world where people need to know that same love, hope, peace, and joy.

So, we come to the table, and we confess our sins in prayer first because we know we don't come without the need for forgiveness. This meal is simple, yet powerful because it reminds us of God's grace that invites us to pray with each other and for each other and be connected.

Christ has gathered us around the table with people around the world. Let us pray...