

“The Heart of the Matter”
Ephesians 4:29-32; Matthew 18:21-22
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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A number of years ago, the now deceased, world-renowned scholar of religions, Huston Smith, gave a lecture in which he characterized the most notable, most peculiar aspect of each religion.

He went through different religious traditions.

For Christians...he said the most notable characteristic of our faith was forgiveness. Not that other faiths don't value forgiveness or practice forgiveness. But in the Christian faith, the command is to forgive anyone and everyone. Even our enemies.¹

According to Smith, forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian faith.

We continue our sermon series on words of faith this morning, and our word for today is “forgive”.

Let me begin by saying how grateful I am at already having received forgiveness from any number of you. You have been very gracious when, for example, you've introduced yourself to me...and the next time around, I forgot your name.

You have been more than understanding.

I hope—I hope—that kind of a mistake on my part is not too terribly difficult to forgive.

But what about when something is difficult to forgive?

I recall reading Anne Lamott's description of what happened with her mother. Lamott writes that she had a complicated relationship with her mother. It was painful in a whole lot of places, and the resentment festered for years.

¹ From “The First Word,” by William H. Willimon, in his book *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Then her mom died.

“I prayed for my heart to soften,” Lamott writes,
“to forgive her, and love her for what she did give me—
life, great values, a lot of tennis lessons, and the best she could
do.

“Unfortunately, the best she could do was terrible.”

Her mother was cremated,
and Lamott says that when she received her mother’s ashes,
she intended to put them on the bookshelf next to the boxes that
contained the remains of the family pets.

But OLD WOUNDS got the better of her,
so Lamott decided, in a moment of spite,
to put the cremains in the back of a closet for two years,
where, as she put it, mom could “stew in her own ashes.”²

At least Lamott could laugh about it all.
Because sometimes, that’s the way it is, right?
Sometimes, many times, forgiveness TAKES TIME.

It doesn’t always happen overnight, because we know it’s going to COST us something.

But let’s hit the pause button:

It occurs to me that we often talk about forgiveness without DEFINING it...without saying this is what we do when we forgive. For example, there’s the phrase “forgive and forget”—but I believe those are two VERY DIFFERENT ACTS.

Forgiving and forgetting are NOT the same thing.
We might remember old hurts, and it’s beyond our power to forget them.
But according to Jesus, it is within our power to forgive them.

² Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA), 2005.

So what are we doing, when we forgive someone?
For starters, forgiveness is an act of giving something up, right?
It is an act of letting something go.

Forgiveness means giving up the power to exact punishment or revenge.
It requires that we LET GO of the grudge we would really rather nurse.

Forgiveness is the act of swallowing our pride and depositing our anger at the door and saying to ourselves, "I'm not going to spend my energy on this wound anymore!"

Forgiving is a hard thing to do, because it's a COSTLY thing to do.

But as soon as I say that, something else occurs to me.
And perhaps you've experienced this in your own life...
if forgiving someone can be a very costly experience for us,
so can NOT forgiving someone.

Have you ever experienced that?
How NOT FORGIVING can cost an awful lot as well?
How it may even have a higher price tag than the act of forgiving?

The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr once wrote about the death of his own mother:

"She was lingering on the threshold, and for several days she had been talking about 'a mesh' she couldn't get through.

I was sitting by her bed, telling her how much I would miss her.

She said she wanted to hear that from my father.
Of course, Daddy had been telling her that for weeks.
So Daddy came over and effusively told her, "Oh, I'm going to miss ya."
She replied, "I don't believe it."

I couldn't believe my ears!
I said, "Mother, you're a few hours from death. You can't say that!"
She persisted: "I don't believe it."

Daddy redoubled his efforts: “I ask your forgiveness for all the times I’ve hurt you in our fifty-four years of marriage, and I forgive you for all the times you’ve hurt me.”

I said, “Mother, isn’t that beautiful? Now say that back to Daddy.”
And suddenly she clammed up.

I said, “Mother, you’re soon going to be before God. You don’t want to come before God without forgiving everybody.”

She said, “I forgive everybody.”
I said, “But do you forgive Daddy?” and she became silent again.

Then I said, “Mother, let’s try this. Put one hand on your heart, and I’m going to pray that your heart gets real soft.”

Rohr says that he placed one of his hands on hers, over her heart,
and held her other hand and started kissing it.

After about a minute she said, very faintly, “That melts me.”

“When you kiss my hand like that, now I’ve got to do it.”
She continued: “I’m a stubborn woman. All of my life I’ve been a stubborn woman.”

She looked over at Rohr’s father... “Rich, I forgive you.”

I prompted her again: “Mother, the other half—I ask for your forgiveness.”
She started breathing heavily and rapidly.
Then she summoned her energy and said, “Rich, I ask your forgiveness.”

A few more moments of labored breathing, and she said, “That’s it, that’s it....The mesh is gone!”

Then she said, referring to Rohr’s siblings, “Tell the girls to do this early and not to wait ‘til now...”³

³ From Richard Rohr’s daily meditation, “The Power of Forgiveness,” August 27, 2017.

How important is forgiveness on your “to-do” list today?
Is there any grudge that you’re holding onto right now?
Any lingering pain that’s keeping you from forgiving right now?

On the one hand, I know it takes time to forgive.
On the other hand, when we put it off, and put it off...we’re not just putting off forgiveness.

We’re putting off God.

Maybe one reason we find it challenging to forgive is that we know, in our heart of hearts, that forgiveness changes things. It changes us...it changes other people. Maybe we resist difficult acts of forgiveness because deep down, what we’re really scared of is this CHANGE that forgiveness brings about, this change that leaves us out of control, and in the hands of God.

So perhaps there’s another way to look at this.

It’s almost like I’ve been presenting forgiveness as if God gives us this command—FORGIVE—and sits back, waiting to see if we can pass this terribly difficult test.

Is that the way the Bible describes it?
I’m not sure that’s the way the Bible describes it.

According to Ephesians, we are to forgive one another, as God in Christ has ALREADY forgiven us.

In other words, forgiveness is not a test to pass.
It is a gift of God that each of us has already received.
And we are being asked by Jesus to SHARE IT...

In a recent article, the pastor Sam Wells reflects on something that happened in the very first church that he served as a minister.

“...there was an 11-year-old boy who started coming to my church at the suggestion of a teacher at his middle school,” Wells writes.

“He was an isolated, disconsolate figure who didn’t mix easily and took a greedy share of the cookies after worship. After he had been coming a few months, funds were found for him to participate in a parish weekend retreat.

“By Saturday morning, the complaints were raining down. He was rude. He was grabbing food. He was bullying the younger children.

“The adults finally had to talk to each other about it; it was one of those parish conversations where the pastor doesn’t get a...vote.

“The teacher through whose influence the boy had first come to church pointed out that, being brought up solely by his young and temperamental father, he was a troubled boy looking for security. Allowances were made, patience was maintained, and gradually the lad began to find his feet.

“Nine months later at a special evening service he was baptized.

His father was not there.

His mother and brother...they weren’t there either.

But about 40 people from the church were there.

And each member of the congregation was invited to describe what they valued most about being members of that church.

When the boy was asked the same question,

[he] ...broke...into a smile, and replied,

‘You didn’t throw me out that weekend.’

It’s the power of forgiveness.

For 23 years, Sam Wells thought that was the end of the story.

But not too long ago, Wells received an email.

“I’m the boy from that weekend,” it read.

And they figured out a way to meet.

Wells heard what happened to the boy after Wells had left his church. It wasn’t all smooth sailing. The boy had become homeless for a period of time, when his father threw him out of the house.

But now he was grown, he had a partner and helped raise her two children.

He had some false starts with work, but now he was employed with a bank, helping others deal with—ironically enough—debt repayment!

Wells was so glad to see him, and so pleased to see him doing well.

The young man had a backpack with him.

“Why’ve you brought a backpack?” Wells asked him.

And this young man pulled out a scrapbook.

In the scrapbook was a letter.

It was a letter that Sam Wells’ wife had written to the boy some 20 some-odd years earlier.

“‘Sam and I are in Liverpool, and last night we saw the Liverpool soccer team in a restaurant, so we got their autographs for you because we know you support them.’

And on the opposite page, there they were.

Six treasured autographs, preserved through seasons of struggle.

Wells writes:

...[his] life had emerged from chaos, and [he] showed me it’s possible to live without bitterness. He didn’t have a bad word for anyone.”

Not for his deceased father.

Not for his difficult mother.

He was a changed person.

They set up a date to see each other again.

Wells concludes:

“I’m excited. I don’t know how to say to him: ‘I gave you some autographs. But you—you showed me [the power of] forgiveness...How can I ever thank you?’”⁴

Not a test to pass...but a gift to share.

Some of you may recall that during the first sermon I preached here, back at the beginning of September, I mentioned a WWII veteran named Glenn Frazier. How Glenn Frazier was a POW in the Pacific Theater, survived the Bataan Death March—his family was told by the US government that he had been killed in action, but in fact he lived and came home to surprise his family in Ft. Deposit, Alabama, only to learn AT THAT POINT that his sweetheart, the woman he was planning to marry, thought he had died as well...and because of this, she became engaged to another man.

Do you remember this story?

In that sermon, I didn’t tell you what happened next with Glenn Frazier.

Glenn Frazier would go on to marry someone else, and have children, and run his own trucking business. But by his own account, the war would NOT go away.

He found himself hating the Japanese for what they had done.

Hating, hating, hating...every day.

And at night—the nightmares arrived.

It was like the war was still going on.

Until one day he realizes that if he doesn’t do something, his hate will consume him.

So he says that he turned to his faith.

And he went to his minister.

And he prayed, and he prayed...and one morning, after 30 years of nightmares, one morning he finally woke up, and felt more rested.⁵

⁴ Samuel Wells, “Love becomes fruitful,” *The Christian Century*, September 13, 2017.

⁵ As told by Glenn Frazier in *The War*, a film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, 2007.

Through his faith, through his prayers, through God's grace...he put his hate behind him.

I Googled Glenn Frazier to see what else I could learn about this remarkable person...you know what else I learned?

After the Ken Burns documentary, he became more well-known.
And he went to churches and other organizations and talked about putting hate behind you.

He went out to talk about the power of forgiveness.

Picture that for a moment...Glenn Frazier, talking to church group after church group...and I wonder if any of the people with whom he spoke decided that if Glenn Frazier can do it, I can do it too. I wonder if any of them went home and forgave the person who had wronged them long ago.

You see, there are RIPPLE EFFECTS to forgiveness.

Sometimes, forgiveness doesn't just change one life.
Sometimes, forgiveness changes more lives than we can count.

I will never forget what Nelson Mandela wrote.

After enduring 27 years in prison for standing against the evil of Apartheid, on February 11, 1990, Mandela was finally free.

In Mandela's autobiography, he writes:

“As I walked out the door toward the gate
that would lead to my freedom,
I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind,
I would still be in prison.”⁶

⁶ *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, by Nelson Mandela, New York: Backbay Books, 2013.

Now how did he do it?
I don't know how he did it.
I do know this.

The RIPPLE is still being felt.

Over 28 years AFTER Mandela was released from prison, and almost 5 years after Mandela's death, the ripple effects of his decision to leave his bitterness behind him...those ripples are still being felt.

“...forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

You heard those words earlier this morning.

When Paul first wrote those words, he wasn't telling the Ephesians that they needed to pass a test.

He was telling them that they had a gift to share.

And the amazing part is this.

Paul never knew you. He never even dreamed of your existence.

But here you are.

You heard those words this morning.

What kind of RIPPLE will those words have...on you?

(Amen.)