

SERMON – “A CELEBRATION OF FORGIVENESS”

By Bill Vamos

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 6:5-15

This morning, I want to invite you to a celebration of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift of God’s grace, which we need to celebrate over and over again. Have you ever had trouble forgiving another person? That’s almost like asking: “Have you ever been tired? What a gift it would be if we could go back over our lives and re-claim all the energy we have spent withholding forgiveness from others! And what peace there is in remembering those times when we have dared to forgive.

My text is Matthew 6:14,15 (G.N.B.)

Jesus said: If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.

That catches like a lump of sawdust in my throat. Perhaps no verses of Scripture are so difficult to apply. We will help ourselves if we start where forgiveness starts. You and I forgive because we, and all the rest of God’s children, have been forgiven by Christ Jesus. That is why I take the risk of preaching on such a deep subject as our need to forgive.

Forgiving is treating another person in the way God treats me, even though the other person has hurt me.

When Jesus says:

“If you forgive others, the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you.

He doesn’t mean that we earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. He means that the journey of forgiveness begins with God, and moves to you, and then to others, and once you start on the forgiving road, you have to finish the journey. Our text invites celebration, not legalism. When we are forgiven, we receive a gift which has every person’s name on it. If we try to keep such a gift to ourselves, it crumbles in our hands.

So Jesus also says:

“...if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.”

Why did Jesus have to add that troublesome, negative equation? Isn't God's grace everlasting? Can I ever lose God's forgiveness of me, no matter what I do?

Look at it this way: Being forgiven without forgiving is like grace without peace and love, grace which can comfort but not heal. It's like saying: "God, please forgive me for what I have done to others, and please zap George for what he did to me."

When I am unforgiving, I have put up a wall between myself and another person, a wall that shuts God out too, and even separates me from myself. In the negative expression of our text, Jesus is saying that God won't remove that wall unless we cooperate.

George Buttrick, in writing on this text, tells us that: If a (person) says, 'I'll never forgive you!' he can hardly be forgiven: He is not in the mood. He is not penitently aware of his (own) sins, but only vengefully aware of another (person's) sins. He is not thinking about God: He is intent rather on his prideful self...An unforgiving spirit in us shuts the door in God's face, even though (God's) compassions still surround the house. When General Oglethorpe said to John Wesley, 'I never forgive,' Wesley answered, 'Then I hope, sir, (that) you never sin.'"

"...if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done," Jesus said. Those words might discourage us, were it not for the affirmation which precedes them: *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you."*

There's no threat here, not even a foreboding demand. No, in this passage Jesus invites us to receive a blessing. As difficult as it is to forgive, I have found that forgiving others opens me within, so God can reach into the depth of my being and heal me, and give me cleansing and peace and a new freedom, and enable me to grow in faith.

When you forgive another person for his arrogance or hatred or meanness, or anything else, your own "can of worms" opens and God cleans up your life. Forgiving others is like a gust of fresh air blowing through a basement filled with cobwebs.

The healing hand of forgiveness can even touch our memories of those with whom we have known broken relationships or of loved ones who have died. In our prayers, we can remember then, and prayerfully go back and forgive them, setting ourselves free to live and to love in new and surprising ways.

"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you." In preparation of this sermon, I found myself thinking of people whom I have not forgiven, and I discovered that it is much easier to preach on forgiveness than it is to forgive. When this sermon is over, the key question for all of us will be: How do I move from words to actual willingness to forgive?

I'm going to give an illustration from my own life. It comes out of my experience in the American culture. I hope and pray that, in some way, my illustration will be helpful to

you. Some years ago, my wife Josephine and I moved to Lafayette, so I could pursue the vision of starting a new kind of Spiritual Growth Retreat Center. Jo, had supported me in making the change to a new kind of ministry, but, in the process, we left a very loving church in the friendly community of Elkhart, Indiana, where we had lived for ten years, and moved to Lafayette, the location for the new Retreat Center's offices.

In time, Jo found herself missing her many friends in Elkhart, and she also missed the special support that comes with being a pastor's spouse. Although she loves me very much, and didn't want to offend me, she also found herself resenting me because of the intense difficulty which she experienced in our move, and, sometimes, she expressed her resentment to me in words.

When that happened, I let her comments hurt my feelings. My response to her was, "If you would just pray more, and complain less, everything would be all right." I am sure that you understand that my response was not very popular with Jo.

We found ourselves needing to forgive each other, but unwilling to do so. I thought that Jo's sin against me was so troublesome, that only God's forgiveness would be adequate. In my prideful attitude, I thought that if I forgave her, that would be woefully inadequate. And she felt the same way toward my arrogant attitude, until each of us realized that nothing would be solved unless each of us forgave the other person first, even before the resentment had died.

Since that time, we have been learning that taking forgiving action is the first step, after which, over a period of time, the healing of our emotions will surely follow.

In the process of forgiving, many people find that a trusted friend or a counselor can be very helpful. Of course, we also need to tell God about our resentments, in our prayers. Sometimes the hurt is so deep within that we can't even honestly will to forgive, in which case our need is to work through our resentment and let the willingness to forgive be our goal.

But the key to the whole process is to keep concentrating on God's forgiveness of us, and then on our forgiving the one who has hurt us. Sooner, or later, the matter is settled within ourselves, even if the other person does not respond to us. If that is the case, it is still painful, but here is a measure of real healing within.

Where do you get the power to forgive? Ask God to help you. Begin by asking the Lord to enable you to see how gracious and forgiving God is to you.

Jesus said:

"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

Some time ago, a friend of mine told me the following story. He said: “Several years ago, I had occasion to be a care-giver to a young man who was deeply troubled. He was a Christian by confession of faith, active in his church in a variety of ways, married with two children, possessed of a good job with an adequate income. But things were not right. He knew that, but didn’t know what the problem was. As I listened, it became evident to me that he was a hostile young man filled with bitterness. He had an adversary relationship with his mother and sister. He perpetually quarreled with his wife. His supervisor at work was always hounding him. His fellow employees were unfriendly. Every relationship that he had – with the possible exception of his two daughters been fraught with destructive conflict. And every alienating conflict was always the “fault of the other person in the relationship.”

My friend continued this story by saying: “I gave the young man an assignment. I asked him to block out thirty minutes each day for 30 days, and, in those daily moments, he was to read Matthew 6:14 and 15 and prayerfully reflect on how he saw himself in his relationships with others in the context of that passage. It did not take 30 days for things to begin to happen. He made a list – supervisor, co-workers, wife, mother, sister, etc., and over a period of time, he set things right with each of them. His life has changed – and those who were his adversaries are now his allies and his advocates. He has been emptied of his negative spirit and is loving and compassionate – a joy to those who are in his presence.”

I challenge you to become forgiving people. Let each of you reflect upon your own need to be forgiven by others. Can you withhold forgiveness from someone else, knowing that, without you, something is missing?

I had difficulty deciding how to conclude this sermon, until I realized that only you can write the conclusion. Think of a person whom you need to forgive, and we’re going to use the next minute or two, in silent prayer, to ask God to give each of us the power to enjoy the healing experience of forgiving.