

## The Power to Forgive

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Genesis 18:1-33; Matthew 18:18-35

“If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”  
-- Genesis 18:26

Do you think of yourself as a weak person? As incompetent? As a loser? As a victim?

If you do, then forgiveness is probably going to more than you can manage, and life is going to be a pretty miserable experience for you.

But if you think of yourself as someone who has survived; who has coped and is, at this very moment, still coping; who may have mastered a decent set of life-skills; and risen, more often than not, to life's challenges, then forgiveness is within reach. In fact, if you're someone who has, with God's help, constructed a life for yourself, rather than let others construct one for you, you've had to reach for forgiveness many times, since it's one of the basic tools we use to make a life for ourselves.

You asked me to preach on forgiveness, specifically on learning how to forgive, so I want to begin our thoughts about that topic this morning by speaking about the power to forgive, because many of us, I think, feel that we don't have that power. We feel that we're too weak, spiritually or emotionally or psychologically, to forgive some grievous wrong we've suffered. We don't feel that we're big enough people, spiritually speaking, to forgive those who have trespassed against us. We look to Jesus, who forgave even his executioners, and say we can't do that.

I want to challenge that kind of feeling and thinking this morning. I want to say to all of you who feel that you can't forgive that you're wrong; you can. The power to forgive is the power of the strong, and none of you sitting here this morning got to this service because of your weakness; you got here because of your strength. You have the power to forgive.

It's not the strong who have trouble forgiving, it's the weak. It's the people who are not just sensitive, but who are hypersensitive to the wrongs, slights, injustices, and injuries that we all suffer in the course of life who have the most difficulty forgiving. Focusing on one's injuries rather than on one's health is a basic personality orientation, similar to whether one sees the glass half empty or half full, and the folks who focus on the negative in their lives were captured fancifully in the character of Eeyore, Milne's perpetually gloomy donkey.

Outside of children's books, of course, negative self-perception is a much more serious matter. And not just negative self-perception that's a problem; a fearful disposition, rooted so deeply in the psyche that it's not recognized for what it is, often gives rise to compensating behavior that's so misplaced that we call it bullying. That's where most bullies come from – people who are so perpetually afraid of being hurt or deprived that they live in a state of unrelenting aggression and defensiveness toward others. They do unto others before others do unto them the hurtful things the bully imagines people will do to them. This is a kind of paranoia, of course, since healthy

people know that most people are not going to do hurtful things to others. Bullies don't live with that awareness; instead, they live swaddled in fear, and fear always makes us weak.

So does anger, although we don't often spot this. When people react angrily to something – and anger is always reactive, it's never proactive – they certainly don't appear to be weak, but every one of us who has “lost it,” as we say, knows that we we lost was our self-control, and when you're no longer in control of your emotions, you're weak – vulnerable, if you prefer that word – because the primary tools we use to get through life – our feelings and our thoughts – are scattered hither and yon, beyond our reach, and we're less competent than we were before we became angry. Every parent who has been pushed over the edge by their child – or every teacher who has been pushed over the edge by a student or every supervisor who's been pushed over the edge by an employee – knows this to be true. When we respond badly to bad behavior, we know that we have lowered ourselves to a level where we don't want to be.

And most of us, happily, do not spend much time there. Most of us spend most of our days somewhere between our worst selves and our best selves, somewhere in the ordinary middle.

But every now and then, something pushes us into that dark place of anger or fear or pain, and we find ourselves struggling to free ourselves from feelings that seem more powerful than our wills. Feelings of resentment, anger, anxiety, guilt, shame – how do we let go of that which doesn't let go of us? We do so by forgiving, by exercising the power that we all already have, the power to forgive.

When you asked me to preach about this topic, I quite naturally turned to one of the Bible's great stories about forgiveness, Abraham's haggling with God over the fate of Sodom, which Linda and I read as our first lesson.

To bring us up to the story's speed. By the time we reach the eighteenth chapter in the story of origins that makes up most of Genesis, there is international outrage, as we'd say today, about Sodom. Most of us know the R-rated part of Sodom's story, which follows this morning's reading, and if you've forgotten it you can read it for yourself in chapter nineteen. The precise nature of Sodom's sin isn't terribly important, but it's a capital offense, serious enough to warrant wiping out the place. Abraham doesn't disagree about the gravity of the offense, but he does raise the important question of indiscriminate punishment. What if everybody isn't guilty? Would Yahweh “sweep away the righteous with the wicked” Abraham asks in verse 23. To destroy the good for the sake of destroying the bad seems to Abraham to be the story of crime against humanity that the Sodomites themselves apparently are in the habit of committing. Surely the Judge of all the earth can do better than that.

And indeed God can. God recoils from that idea and says that he will spare a city full of guilty people for the sake of only a handful of righteous people. That's the way God forgives. God forgives the bad for the sake of the good. However small a percentage of the whole it may be, the good prevails, in God's eyes, and is so precious and so powerful that the bad must be forgiven. That's justice, Yahweh-style. Is that our first lesson in learning how to forgive? Recognizing that forgiveness operates not on the basis of the wrong but on the basis of the right?

God forgives the bad for the sake of the good in the city of Sodom. Is that city, with the possibility of its mixture of good and evil, so very different from any one of us? Are we not similar mixtures ourselves, and are we not surrounded by people who are equally mixed – and mixed up? If, in our anger or hurt or resentment over being wronged we fail to see the good in the one who has hurt us, are we not guilty of sweeping away the good with the bad, the very thing that a forgiving God refuses to do?

We all know that when you crack your shin against a table in the middle of the night, your whole body becomes one big, painful shin, and the coffee table or the edge of the bed or whatever the offending object was becomes a loathsome object worthy of eternal damnation.

Our emotions work in similar ways. When someone hurts us, really hurts us, all we can focus on, in that moment, is our pain and their deed. Those are the only two realities that we're aware of just then. It doesn't matter that there may be years or even decades of perfectly happy relationship behind the rupture; the pain may be so great or the offense so gratuitous that we can't see or remember anything else. And if we allow ourselves to remain in that place of pain, the person who always loses is us. Forgiveness is what gets us out of that pain.

And that's why the story of God's willingness to forgive Sodom is about God and not about Sodom. It doesn't matter, really, what the Sodomites did or didn't do; the theologians writing Genesis were telling us something about the nature of God and the nature of forgiveness. And what they're telling us is that forgiveness is always far more about the one forgiving than the one forgiven. The story of the Bible doesn't follow Sodom; it follows God, and that's a crucial message for us to hear when it comes to forgiveness: the future belongs to those who forgive. People who do not forgive are stuck in the past, with neither present nor future.

And since life is here, in the present, and you're there, in the past, life is passing you by. And you wake up one morning surprised to find yourself old, but not so surprised to find that you're sad, lonely, and bitter, because you realize that you had no life because you refused to forgive. You refused to leave the place of anger and pain and that became your life, which is no life at all. That's how important forgiveness is.

Forgiveness is not, in the first instance, about the person who has done wrong; it's about the person who has been wronged. That's why the focus of our first lesson stays on God. And that's why Jesus tells us, in the reading from Matthew, that unless we forgive others, God will not forgive us. We cannot be in our proper relationship with God when we are in broken relationships with others, because God and others are too closely intertwined to make that sharp distinction.

This is why Jesus links loving God and loving our neighbor as the two great commandments. We love others because other people are the image and likeness of God on earth, just as we are – despite all of their shortcomings and despite of all ours. Christian anthropology affirms the essential goodness of human beings, no matter how depraved their actions may be, not because of how those humans choose to exercise their wills, but because of where we believe those humans came from, because of whose image and likeness they bear, and because of to whom we believe those human beings ultimately belong.

And because we are God's image and likeness on earth, we share in God's power: God's power to create, God's power to love, and God's power to forgive. That's where the power to forgive comes from – from a position of power. People who are able to forgive have sufficient spiritual depth, strength, and resiliency to recognize wrongs and hurts for what they are and, more importantly, for what they are not. The majority of things that need our forgiveness are not life threatening. They're not even serious enough to fight about. We may be bruised, we may be injured, we may even bear the scar for life, but whether or not we recover from the injuries that are an inevitable part of life is up to us. Recovery depends entirely on our decisions – plural – to forgive.

The writer Anne Lamott says that not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. Not forgiving is holding on to pain, and forgiveness is the decision we make not to increase the world's pain by holding on to ours. That's all

forgiveness is: the decision we make not to increase the world's pain.

And I daresay that putting it to you that way this morning tells each and every one of you that you know you have the power to forgive because you know you have the power not to increase the world's pain. You have the power not to do that. You know you have. You have the power and you have the will because you're the folks of good will. You showed up. You bothered. You arrived at the church door hopeful that what we would say here and do here and pray for here and hope for here would make some small difference in your life, and through that life make some small difference, for the better, in the world. That's what brings all of us to church Sunday after Sunday.

And seeing that, I live in hope, and the conviction that all of you have the power to forgive.