

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS
SEVENTH IN THE SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
NOVEMBER 9, 1986

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Many of us have difficulty living our lives to the fullest. Sometimes we feel crippled, inhibited, prevented from doing what we would like to do. Sometimes we feel as if our energy were dissipated, as if our energy were being used for something other than what we want to do. There are negative drains on our energy which cripple, inhibit and strangle our creativity and our ability to cope with life. One of the strongest of these negative drains upon our energy is the need for forgiveness.

Let me repeat that. Based on my experience working with people in ministry these many years, and by observing myself, I see a great deal of energy expended on either trying to find forgiveness for ourselves, or trying to forgive others. As a result, people find themselves tied in knots, afraid to risk, afraid to be creative, uncomfortable with others and themselves, emotionally paralyzed, overwhelmed, suffocated, unable to move forward. Sometimes we don't realize that what is bothering us is the need to be forgiven, that the need for forgiveness is what is taking our energy.

Finding forgiveness has long been an obsession of humankind. Throughout history, people have devised elaborate rituals to find forgiveness. They have tried to find something else to take the blame. Sins were laid on a goat--called the scapegoat--and chased into the wilderness or sacrificed on an altar. Sacrificial systems have been devised to atone or make amends to God whom they feel is angry at them for their sins. They try to make it up to God so that God will forgive them. People do penance--ritual acts--to find forgiveness. They feel a compulsion to do something. Trying to find forgiveness is not a new phenomenon on the face of the earth, nor is it any less prevalent today. Finding forgiveness is an unconscious, sometimes conscious, driving force.

The good news of the gospel is that there is forgiveness of sins. The nature of God, as revealed to us through Jesus, is forgiving. God is not a vengeful, wrathful God, holding us liable forever. At some point there is pardon, there is a second chance. We believe in the second chance...and the third chance. Rejoice! Forgiveness is possible, dramatized on the cross, celebrated in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

What do we mean by forgiveness? You've heard the advice--forgive and forget--but you can't forget a sin. You can try to forget, but the more you try to forget, the more you concentrate, the more unforgettable it becomes. Matthew Fox in his book, *Original Blessing*, writes, "Forgiveness is another word for letting go." Being forgiven means to let go, let go of the guilt, let go of the memory, let go of the pain. How do you let go? How do you receive forgiveness? What do you do to be forgiven?

First, in honesty, admit there is something wrong, and determine from whom you need forgiveness. Sometimes in our depression or paralysis, in our inability to get moving, we are too vague about the problem. Be specific. Where is the block? What relationship have you strained? From whom do you need forgiveness? Your father? Or mother? Neighbor? Coworker? Son or daughter? God? Yourself? Sometimes it is difficult to forgive yourself. People tell me, "I feel God has forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself." They seem to feed on the guilt. They can't let it go.

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After you have determined from whom you need to be forgiven, then, secondly, confess. Go to the person and say, "I'm sorry." If you can't go in person, telephone. Or, write to the person. Often, writing is very helpful before you speak to the person. When you try to confess in person, emotions are high, and the other person gets involved too quickly. Write a letter to the person; either mail it or hand deliver it, and then discuss it. Writing helps you clarify your own thinking, and reading a letter before discussion helps diffuse the tension and defensiveness.

If the person is deceased, then, indeed, write the confession. Some folks are carrying around a load of guilt that deals with a parent who is dead. Writing clarifies and helps you unload. Some folks have old regrets inside them, stifling them, strangling them, festering and causing emotional or physical illness. Get them out. Let them go.

Confess to God as well, in a written prayer or a spoken prayer, or both. And then, share your confession with someone else. In James 5:16, we read, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Express those feelings that have been contained for years. It really helps to talk them out.

Thirdly, sometimes it is helpful to do something. Writing and telling are not enough for some people. They feel they ought to do something. In Roman Catholic tradition, the priest often gives the confessor something to do--acts of penance they are called. We Protestants believe in justification by faith, but still there are times when an act is called for. If you have hurt someone, if you have offended someone, an act of restitution might be in order.

The Gospel lesson this morning, Luke 19:1-10, is about the tax collector, Zacchaeus, a social outcast because he was a tax collector. When Jesus came to town, Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree so he could get a better view of Jesus. Jesus saw him, called him by name, and said, "Come on down, Zacchaeus, I would like to go to your house." Jesus honored him and Zacchaeus, filled with joy and gratitude, said he would give half of his wealth to the poor and make restitution to those he had wronged. To any person he had cheated when collecting taxes, he would pay them four times the amount of the fraud. Jesus rejoiced and said, "Today, salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus wanted to be forgiven. He welcomed Jesus and received God's love; but, in order to experience forgiveness, he had to do something.

After you have confessed to another orally and/or in writing, and to God in prayer; after you have done something like an act of restitution if it is appropriate; then give the sin to God. Give it to God. Let it go. Trust God to take your confession, forgive you, and give you the power to let the matter go. Then, put your energy into moving forward with your life. Act as if you are forgiven. Walk by faith, which means to act as a forgiven person in Christ.

Now, how do you forgive someone who has hurt you, let you down, wronged you or disappointed you? Do you realize that some of your problems, some of your hangups, one of the reasons you feel listless, weak, stifled, and uncreative, might be because you need to forgive someone? Again, analyze yourself. Pinpoint the problem. At whom are you angry? Who hurt your

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feelings? Who ignored you? Who let you down? Who has wronged you? Who are you secretly or unconsciously punishing by pouting or treating coldly or withdrawing? Ironically, the intended victim often doesn't even know he/she is being punished! The one you end up punishing is yourself because the anger, bitterness, self-pity and revenge eat your insides, and make you sick physically, emotionally or no fun to be around.

After you have determined the offender, confess to him/her how you have been hurt and how you feel. Don't hide, but confront the person. Jesus gave us this principle in Matthew 18:15, "If someone sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Sometimes the hurt is so deep an arbitrator, a neutral person or persons, is needed. Jesus continued, "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

But, what if there is no response? What if the person does not listen? What if the person doesn't understand you, or doesn't want to understand you? What if the person does not change, and even continues the behavior? What if the person doesn't ask to be forgiven? Do you still forgive? Yes, says Jesus. Peter asked Jesus (Matthew 18:21-22), "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus knew that we must continually forgive, even if the person does not ask to be forgiven, even if the behavior is repeated over and over, because non-forgiveness hurts the "offendee" more than it hurts the "offender."

Forgiving others means to let go--let go of the hurt--and forgiving others means to let be. Let go and let be. Let others be whomever they have chosen to be. Let them be different. Let them have mannerisms which irritate you. Let them be sinners and wrong you. Let them be themselves. Robert Frost expressed it this way:

If one by one we counted people out
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
To get so we had no one left to live with.
For to be social is to be forgiving.

You can't live another person's life. You can't for long manipulate, coerce, or decide for that person. You can only control yourself. You can only decide how you will live. You can't decide how someone else will live, but you can decide how you will live in relation to that person. If you refuse to forgive, the bitterness, anger and hurt will cripple you, not the other persons. Let them be themselves. Let the hurt go.

Keep on forgiving and let the pain go. Matthew Fox writes (pg. 162), "Salvation is not a salvation FROM PAIN, but THROUGH PAIN." The cross of Jesus Christ, on which he painfully died, is our spiritual journey. On the cross, Jesus knew pain. He was not denied pain, but he lived through pain. Jesus demonstrated that to be true to God's kingdom, and to live life fully, you must let go. It is not possible to escape hurt. It is not possible to live your life without hurting someone else, nor is it possible to live your life without someone hurting you. It is not possible to live your life without sinning against God.

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But, we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Confess, repent, and let it go. When people hurt you, confront them, give the hurt to God, let it go and let them be who they are. In God's time--as you wait on the Lord--God will grant you forgiveness and healing. Brothers and sisters, we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Do you? If so, put your belief into practice and forgive. Let it go!