

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

February 24, 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Genesis 45: 1-15**

**Luke 6: 27-38**

### **Things That Make You Go HMMM...**

What does it mean to forgive and what does it mean to be forgiven? My favorite legend of preachers, as many of you know, is CH Spurgeon...England in the 1800's...and one particular insight is a guide for me for any consideration about forgiveness. He says, simply, that forgiveness must always be for Christ's sake...not mine or yours or anothers. It is always for Christ's sake because it is upon God's eternal forgiveness of us through Jesus Christ that any human forgiveness is modeled and molded.



“The Forgiving Sky” by David Tracey

Forgiveness is made possible for us because God...for Christ's sake...forgives us (Ephesians 4:32). All those complicated theological terms describing Christ's saving work, like atonement, substitution, and representation, come into play here...and if you are like Greg Hubert, Chuck Manto, or Marie Sheldon you can study them forever...but the bottom line is that, as the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians...for Christ's sake God has forgiven us and it is a forever kind of forgiveness, therefore, we should forgive one another...kind of a mutual cooperation that is only fair.

But if we cannot do it on our own terms of what seems fair, we may always forgive for Christ's sake. In fact, we may forgive any offender if we get *ourselves* out of the way, for Christ's sake.

Let me give you a clarification, quickly, of the definition of forgiveness that I'm working with. The dictionary says that forgiveness is an attitude and action wherein we cease to feel resentment toward another and we give up claims to retribution. In the Christian context, I believe it is a larger vision that is required because forgiveness is personal. And it is distinguished from two words that often confuse us: 1) Condoning, which says that a moral offense does not matter when, in fact, it does. For example, often when I say, “I cannot forgive myself,” what I really mean is that I cannot condone what I have done. 2) Pardon, which lets a person off the hook for any consequences of his or her actions. This is often the case in official declarations as when Ford pardoned Nixon. Forgiveness, distinct from condoning and pardoning, is personal and not an official attitude. It is instead, “a loving concern for the dignity of persons viewed as ends in themselves” (R.S Downie). And, as such, it opens the door for the goal of forgiveness: reconciliation.

But this is so much more easily said than done. You and I are presented regularly with situations that warrant the consideration of forgiveness...call for it actually, if we are people of faith. Stories of injury done by one person to another: sometimes just the simplicity of biting and bitter words spoken in anger; sometimes in forms of physical violence; sometimes emotional abuse; sometimes personal betrayal of trust or intentional harm or negligence. Sometimes the stories are of such horrid dimension and image that we dare not speak them out loud. And we struggle even at the thought or idea that we should forgive one another even though we know that is what we are asked to do. But it does not stop there.

Because always, any stories of offense, woundedness, or betrayal push us somewhere deep within ourselves to questions about where God is in all of it. You know this is true. I have been with many of you as you wrestled with harm, loss, death, suicides, and violent situations like the presentation "One Love" addresses tonight here in the sanctuary. You've heard it and some of you have said it either out loud or in the silence of your hearts, "Why does God allow this to happen?" Or, more personally, more agonizingly, "Why is God doing this to me?"

So we are jumping right into *that* feeling this morning by watching a clip from the film, "God On Trial", where some men in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany decide to put God on trial...to take a look at how it is that their God has allowed his chosen people to suffer at the hands of such evil. The film is difficult to watch and I am only taking a brief segment which follows a long review of the history of God's covenant with God's people...and a conclusion that essentially finds God guilty of violating the covenant but, in the end, which finds these men reconciling with God in prayer. I encourage you to listen for your own voice that may have called God's goodness into question as you have dealt with hurt in your own life.

GOD ON TRIAL VIDEO CLIP <https://youtu.be/PP4i6tRGw7Q>

"What do we do now?" It's the question that always follows the revelation of devastating news...follows information that alters and changes the circumstances and sometimes the people in our lives. In response to an offense or a wounding we ask, "What do we do now?"

Today's sermon is entitled, "Things That Make You Go Hmmm," and I promise that I did not consciously name it after a rap song from the 90's, although I suppose I could have repressed the memory. The intro to the rap is catchy, punctuated as it is by singers who repeat the refrain, "Things that make you go hmmm..." We've been singing it around the halls all week, and each time we make a discovery that is either surprising or amusing or even incredulous, one of us has said, "Hmmmm..." I even discovered a website that hosts pictures of things that make you go hmmm: a chain link fence that is only 3 inches long, the double doors on the office of a Sliding Glass Doors company, and three squirrels all within 10 feet of each other...one grey, one white and one black. Hmmm.

But the sermon title is not inviting "hmmm's" that are trivial. It is inviting us to reconsider our perspectives on forgiveness and the process of getting there. If we are trying to get to forgiveness for Christ's sake with the end result being reconciliation, what is that process, and what does it require of us?

Today's lectionary in the New Testament continues the "blesseds" and the "woe unto you's" of the Beatitudes from last week which have compelled us to complete dependence on and trust in God rather than investing ourselves in "stuff" and/or the things of this world...earthly things. It embraces love of enemies and treating others as you would want to be treated yourself. It forbids judging and condemning others, and asks you to be merciful. It requires that we forgive one another.

Interestingly, as I said earlier, the goal of human forgiveness rests in reconciliation. Reconciliation does not mean, by the way, that one condones or pardons the offense. It does not even necessarily mean that there is an ongoing relationship ...sometimes that is not possible. As I tell couples in counseling, there needs to be reconciliation between the two of you, and thus with God, whether the marriage stays together or not. A mutual acknowledgement of responsibility and moving forward, and beyond, and back to God.

The Old Testament message today asks us to picture the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers as the model. His brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery in Egypt, are called forward by Joseph in order to forgive and restore their relationships. Reconciliation involves more than forgiveness here...it is restoring and renewing the relationship that moves well beyond the offense. The question is raised for us when we read,

*"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me. I am your brother whom you sold into Egypt...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves...for God sent me before you to preserve life.' Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him...."*

How could that possibly happen? How did Joseph do this...emotionally? What did he do with his anger and hurt...his desire for vengeance? How did he transition from justifiable outrage to love?

Further, how did he put that forgiveness into an action and an attitude that not only restored the relationships but actually enriched them...redeeming the injury and harm done so that reconciliation was possible? How did the men in that concentration camp move from outrage over betrayal and a guilty verdict about God, to prayer?

I think we must begin with a willingness to consider aspects of our hurt or wounded situations that make us go hmmm. I think we must begin with an awareness and acceptance of God being greater than anything we can imagine...with a history to prove it...and a willingness to put ourselves into the hands of God. To fall back upon the mercy and love of God, like those men at Auschwitz, and return to trust and prayer. To remember that God holds a bigger picture, a larger vision of life than we do.

I have three examples of what I mean that make you go hmmm...two verbal and one visual. Borrowed from a chapter on *Acts of Reconciliation in Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, these first two examples encourage us to rise above or look beyond the human need

to forgive...to look at forgiveness as the vehicle to reconciliation for Christ's sake and from God's vantage point.

I offer a quick disclaimer here, that I am not supporting or advocating anything, only asking that you consider what forgiveness and reconciliation would look like in each situation.

One of the men in the clip "God on Trial," used the story of Abraham and Isaac as condemning evidence of God's unkindness and unfairness. You know the story: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a kind of proof of his faithfulness. It is the most unpopular story in the Bible, fyi, even though it does turn out alright in the end. When we are able to see this in the larger picture as being more than just a struggle between duty and love, and view it from the resulting reconciliation between God and humanity/faithfulness and grace united...then we can better grasp it.

In the late 70's, George Segal, a Princeton University sculptor, was commissioned to make a memorial to the Kent State shootings in 1970 wherein 4 students were shot and 9 wounded by the National Guard during a protest of the Viet Nam War. Segal sculpted a depiction of the Abraham and Isaac story. Kent State, seeing the work, refused it, not being able to understand Segal's intention to demonstrate themes of violence and compassion (Abraham's right hand holds a knife with which to do violence, while his left is gestured in compassion). Kent State refused the work saying that there were too many who were conservative on their campus, who felt that these students got what they deserved...that only violence would be recognized. They could not look beyond and forward, but were stuck in the hurt. The memorial can now be seen on the Princeton campus. Hmmmm...

The second example concerns two other memorials, one at the Chapel of Reconciliation in England whose center of reconciliation may only be entered into by walking first through ruins that bear testimony to the hate and revenge and sorrow resulting from the enmity among the nations that created them. The point is that in order to really grasp healing the broken and uniting the separated, we have to acknowledge that something is quite wrong. It is the only way to get it right.

Following WWI, Harvard University (1931) determined to build a church, and within it memorialize the Harvard graduates who had died for their country in the war. There were four, however, who were not chosen to be honored, even though they were Harvard grads and had died in the war for their country...but not for the Allied Forces. Years and years later a plaque was erected in their honor stating: Harvard University has not forgotten her sons who under opposite standards gave their lives for their country (1914-1918). An act of reconciliation. Hmmmm...

What does it take to move through the hurt and the anger to consider forgiveness for Christ's sake and embrace reconciliation? We must find and reclaim that relationship with God that sees beyond and forward...that holds us in the worst of times.

I'm closing with a scene from MASH...not because of its clear connection to wounds of violence but because of the character's digging deep to go beyond and forward from his

woundedness...to find God's gift and blessing given to us from the beginning of time and reclaim it in new form.

MASH clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijEiwBLCXeo>

Friends, we are one with God. God intended it that way from Creation. Life gives us many challenges and wounds and unfairness. God does not do that to us. But God is with us. Always. Amen.