

Sermon Notes – Why do we Forgive? 26-2-23

Passage: Colossians 3:12-17

This term we have been thinking about what church is, and what it should be. And we have been honest that in church, as in all areas of life, the sense of routine can take over, and we can find ourselves going through the motions without connecting on a deeper level with what we are trying to do, and to be, and to achieve. So we have been asking, why do we do what we do?

Why do we have Holy Communion, why do we preach the Scriptures, why do we encourage each other in the exercise of our gifts and talents, and today: why do we forgive? Or perhaps, more painfully, Do we forgive?

And this is difficult because it reminds us that church is not perfect. And of course, in our heads we know that, but in our heart of hearts, we can feel more vulnerable in this space because quite rightly, we have higher expectations of church than we do of the other institutions or networks we are connected with, be that work, social groups or volunteer projects. We have higher expectations for church.

And we can be left thinking, how is it that the church has such a good message to proclaim, and yet we can get it so wrong?

So I have been thinking about this a lot this week. And I have come to the conclusion that there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, and we often get the two confused.

Reconciliation is where there is a break down in a relationship, but there is a mutual desire, a shared willingness from both parties, to work together toward change. Reconciliation happens when both parties are willing to work together toward change. But in church life, we often get that confused with forgiveness. And so we say to ourselves, "I will forgive, but only when I can be assured the other person is in a place to receive it." And I think that is a cause of a great deal of hurt and bitterness - when we say, "When I am convinced that this other person is ready, I will think about forgiveness."

But I don't think that is what forgiveness is. Now I know why I do it. It's a self-preservation thing. I don't want to go out on a limb, I don't want risk further hurt. But I don't think that is what forgiveness is.

Let me put it like this, did Jesus wait until I was in the right frame of mind before he died for me? – or was his forgiveness offered irrespective of my worthiness? – irrespective of my readiness to receive? That's why we call it a gift, that's why we call it grace.

So what is forgiveness? Now, in our reading today, the word Paul uses for forgiveness in Colossians 3:13 – comes from that same word – "grace." Forgiveness doesn't require mutual reciprocity because forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness is the gift you extend to others. And yet, if we are honest, we are so quick to weaponize it. We withhold forgiveness in the hope it will teach the other person a lesson. But what we don't realise, is that when we do that, we are wielding a sword with a sharpened handle, it hurts us just as much as the other person. And we can find ourselves harbouring bitterness for so long, which has an enormous power over us, because we have confused reconciliation with forgiveness, because we are waiting for a moment that might never come.

So, if the other person's readiness, or worthiness, is not my motivation to forgive, what should be? Let's turn to Colossians 3:12 – 13.

'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.'

There is here an expectation that we in the church will be graciously disposed to one another, but the motivation for forgiveness is clear. I must learn to forgive, because God forgave me. I must learn to forgive, not because I deem that the other person is sorry, not because I deem the other person worthy, but because God forgave me.

Now let me be clear, this is not to say that contrition is not important. This is not to say when we have been wronged that the other person should not be held accountable, not at all. And we do indeed hope for reconciliation in that sense. But first and foremost, the motivation to forgive is because God first forgave you.

Now, does that mean that forgiveness is easy? No, it certainly does not. And getting to that place only comes with much soul-searching, and at great cost to ourselves. It means we have to shine a light on the uglier part of our inner lives that might not want to let go of a past grievance, that might not want to confront the mess of a particular situation.

But nor is this to say that any of this can be rushed. Nor is this to say that learning to forgive doesn't mean we recognise that things might have changed in a relationship where new boundaries or a sense of distance is appropriate. Forgiveness might mean that life going forward looks different. But the point is: we wrestle inwardly to come to a point where we can forgive, not because we deem the other person sufficiently sorry, but rather, we forgive because God forgave us.

And we trust that God is doing his own thing, is about his own work in the life of those who may have wronged us or hurt us.

It is sometimes said that "sorry" can be the hardest word. But I think the phrase "I forgive you" might be harder still – but also, more liberating, and more healing. And I think that this imbalance is reflected in the Church's teaching. I think in the evangelical tradition we talk more about the theology of repentance than the ethics of forgiveness. Of course, we need both. I need to learn to say sorry, that's confession. But I must also learn to forgive, that's fellowship.

Colossians 3:14 goes on to say, *'And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity'*.

So this Lent, can I encourage to use these forty days to do that hard, costly work of reflection. To sincerely ask yourself, "am I holding on to a spirit of unforgiveness?" To ask yourself, what do I need to do, to get to that place that acknowledges that your forgiving someone should not be contingent on whether you consider the other person as being sufficiently sorry, but rather, acknowledges that we must forgive, because God forgave us.

God's grace is a gift, but when it comes to forgiveness, we see that God's grace is also a challenge. May the Lord's Spirit enable us to forgive, and to love as we ought. Amen.