

Matthew 18:21-35
July 13, 2008

South Plains
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Right Answer: Wrong Response

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Christian life is realizing that forgiving something does not always mean we can forget the wrong done to us. My first year at the University, I invited a girl to a football game. She was tall, good-looking and a little exotic, the kind of girl I would never have asked out in high school. But, I was now a college man. I managed conversation with her on the way to the stadium, and we found a seat next to the guy who lived across the hall in my dorm. This was a relief at first because John was and still is a glib conversationalist. But, by the end of the first quarter, I realized he was trying to snake my date. Eventually he realized that I realized what was going on and he moved. It was easy to “forgive” John once he “repented” by moving. However, I did not forget; and never again did I take that girl to a place where I might run into John.

Forgiving and forgetting can be quite different matters. I like to look with you this morning at this one dimension of the verse from the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Real forgiveness is much more than saying the words, “I forgive you,” as important as those words are. Full forgiveness makes possible a kind of forgetting, but it’s not amnesia and it should not be full forgetfulness.

Forgiveness is a journey, not a single step. It’s a journey that requires some remembering.

The first step toward forgiveness is to step back and look at the big picture. We need to ask ourselves, “How does this damaged relationship affect my relationship to God?” The prayer Jesus teaches says that asking God to forgive our sins is directly connected to our ability to grant forgiveness. For Christians, the stakes are high. Jesus assumes we can never repay the debt owed to God for his forgiveness.

The parable in Matthew 18 compares us to a man who owes his king 10,000 talents or approximately \$120 million. The king forgives the debt, but the man goes out and refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed him. When the king hears about this hardheartedness, he changes his mind and throws the man into prison to be tortured. Jesus’ conclusion is chilling: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart (18:35).” Because we have been forgiven much, we have an obligation to forgive others.

Matthew likes to compare our sins to money that we owe. By the way, language students tell us that in Aramaic, which is the language Jesus probably spoke, the Aramaic version of this prayer could have used a word meaning financial debts in this verse. Luke just says, “Forgive us our sins.” As we know, Presbyterians say, “debts,” and Episcopalians say “trespasses.”

Apparently when Matthew was translated into English for the King James Bible, the translators chose to write, “Forgive us our debts.” But, the Anglican Church had already adopted an older translation with “trespasses.” We say “debts” because we Presbyterians want to be up-to-date with the 17th century.

Just as staying out of financial debt is a lifelong process, learning forgiveness is also a lifelong process. The first step is looking at the big picture carefully enough to realize how much our ability to forgive others is a reflection of our ability to accept God’s forgiveness, and to absorb that forgiveness into our very being.

The second step in forgiveness is to step away from our fantasies about forgetting. We sometimes pretend to forget wrongs even while we nurse a grudge. Have you ever genuinely sought to be forgiven, only to have your apology dismissed with the words, “Oh, I’ve forgotten all about that.” Sometimes that kind of forgetting is a pretense. What’s being forgotten is any shared responsibility for the problem. The subtext of that message may be, “Well, it was all your fault anyway.” The corresponding fantasy is supposing that the magic words are “I’m sorry.” Or, to make the magic really work, we need to say, “I’m so, so sorry.” Easy avoidance may paper over the problem, but it does not lead to forgiveness.

Of course, papering over a wrong usually makes things worse in the long run. A marriage counselor once

told me that when a couple comes for marriage counseling, the problems in their relationship have been festering on average for six years. That’s a lot of pretending to forget. The second step in forgiveness is stepping away from fantasies of forgetting. Jesus says that when a brother or sister has something against us, we should go to see them. Forgiveness starts by confronting the problem.

David Augsberger, whose book *Caring Enough to Forgive*, contributed much to this sermon, says that these first two steps are just the prerequisites for forgiveness. Only in the third step will we begin to get to the heart of the matter. We need to step between the wrong done to us and the wrongdoer, to separate the wrong from the person. This will allow us to value the person, to see them as loved by God, to appreciate the infinite worth God ascribes to each of us. We will still reject their action, but we need not reject the actor.

Separating the person from their behavior may seem artificial at first. But, it allows us to focus clearly on the consequences of what they have done. We cannot change another person, and we cannot what has been done in the past. We may be able to change the consequences. We may decide the damage is less than it seemed and we can respond to a situation more constructively when our judgment is not clouded by personal feelings. Political campaigns provide a negative example of how this works. When political attacks become personal, we forget about the real problems in

our country and delude ourselves into thinking one individual can fix everything.

Clearly, some wrongs should not be forgotten for the safety of those concerned. Remembering can contribute to reconciliation when both parties share in the process of turning bad consequences toward a more positive direction. The third step in real forgiveness separates the wrong from the person. It works in politics, in marriage and in churches.

The fourth and final step is the step toward genuine love. Augsburg calls this “restoring the perceptions of love.” I like that language because it’s so much more realistic than trying to restore feelings of love. We cannot change the way we feel, but we can change the way we see others and how we think about them. So long as I see you as my enemy, I can never forgive you. Ingrid Betancourt was held hostage by Columbian rebels for almost seven years. She told Larry King that she wants to forget what happened and forgive her captors. So, she prays for them.

When my children were learning to drive, it sometimes seemed like they were determined to destroy our cars, one after another. What a foolish perception! A perception that could be overcome only by restoring the perception of love.

This is where repentance enters the process. Full forgiveness requires repentance for wrongs done. Real

repentance usually waits for love. Until love comes into view, repentance hides in fear and uncertainty, waiting for some hint that a changed life will be met with love.

When the perception of love is restored, then real repentance is free to begin and real trust can be re-negotiated. Forgetting about the wrong would become counter-productive. The practice of love is a mutual response. Just as it takes two to tango, it also takes two to trust. When trust and repentance and love are active, we are well on the way to forgiveness. But, to get this far, we had to step back and see the big picture of our relationship with our forgiving God, we had to step away from our fantasies, we had to separate the wrong from the wrong-doer, and finally take a step toward love.

If that seems too complicated, too long a process...well, that’s tough. It took God the lifetime of Jesus to accomplish forgiveness for the sins of the world; and God had a perfect person for that job. One argument in favor of infant baptism is that it gives us an early start on the long journey of accepting and offering forgiveness.

After that football game, I had a couple more dates with that same girl. Then, she broke a date with me because another friend of mine gave her the measles. That’s a little bit of forgiveness that is still unfinished. It takes some of us a long time.