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NO FUTURE WITHOUT FORGIVENESS

Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

A Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove

There may be no worse popular statement ever thrown into the culture than this one: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry” [Erich Segal, *Love Story*].

I remember learning it as a young teenager and trying to imagine a romance so pure that no regrets or apologies were ever appropriate. Even as a kid I knew it was bunk. Love is *all* about saying you’re sorry. And until we humans learn how to do it, both individually and as a world, we’re in deep trouble. Forgiveness is essential to human community, and the act of both asking for and offering forgiveness is a deeply religious one. And powerfully difficult to do.

I’ve thought a lot about forgiveness recently. The short class I led on it earlier this month coincided with the first anniversary of the shootings of the Amish children in Pennsylvania. That coincidence brought home to me—and the participants in the class—just how powerful the act of forgiving can be. As we talked with each other about our own struggles to forgive, we witnessed just how difficult forgiving is. And yet, these Amish families made it seem easy. Well, maybe not easy, but obviously right and good. What was different for them than for most of the rest of the world?

I think one could argue that what was different was both deeply personal and powerfully cultural. And I am now fully convinced that unless we learn to forgive, as individuals and as cultures, the future looks bleak. I am in agreement with South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he said,

“When someone cannot be forgiven there is no future” [Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 151].

We live in perilous times. There is extraordinary risk for catastrophes everywhere we look—from overpopulation and environmental challenges to religious and racial hatred. In our country—which, despite all that is wrong with it, is still, in comparison to so many others, powerfully peaceful and prosperous—hatred and fear lie close beneath the surface. Even the simple act of driving can create a deadly rage.

I don’t believe that people are more or less hate-filled and angry than in the past. Human evolution, however, has brought us to a place where the behavior that emerges from such animosity is far more dangerous. Instead of fists, people use guns and bombs to seek retribution. Instead of one eye for one eye, or one tooth for another, dozens of innocent people die each day from the violence that hate brings out in people. And as we know, hatred breeds more hate, violence gives birth to yet more violence, and the devastating spiral brings us to the warring world we live in—the Middle East being only one sad example.

There are times, I admit, that such ruminations bring me to despair. There are reasons to lack hope, which is the real meaning of despair. Generations of hatred, religious excuses for it, and the example of the 20th century are not exactly role models of forgiveness. But as the Catholic social worker Dorothy Day once said,

“No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do” [*Singing the Living Tradition*, #560].

So what is the work of forgiveness all about? Let’s take a look at that. Rather than starting with the huge acts of forgiveness like the end of apartheid in South Africa (which Desmond Tutu so beautifully writes about in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*), let’s start with the personal. For I believe that until we, as individuals, can imagine ourselves forgiving others and then can actually do it, we will never get anywhere as nations and as a world.

There is today a whole lot of research about the power of forgiveness. There is even an organization called the International Forgiveness Institute located at the University of Wisconsin. I've read a number of books about what forgiveness is and how we can do it. But I think the experience of the class I taught was (as most teachers will tell you is usually the case) where I learned the most. Due to the intimate nature of the conversations we had together, and our promise of confidentiality, I will speak only in generalities but I can assure you that these brief moments together carried enormous power.

Before I tell you some of the interesting things I learned from this short course, however, let me talk a little bit about what forgiveness is. Interestingly, there is not perfect agreement from scholars and others about the true meaning of this word. For many, forgiveness has to include both the one forgiving and the one forgiven. Others believe that forgiveness can take place even if one party is dead or unable or unwilling to reconcile.

I generally agree with this latter definition. I think we can forgive people in our hearts even if they never know or do not care. Reconciliation is the word I use for the two-pronged kind of forgiveness. It is an ideal to strive for but in my experience it is not always possible or even necessary. Forgiveness can take place in one heart only and still have a powerful impact.

While there are many definitions of forgiveness, the one I like best comes from my colleague, Greta Crosby who writes:

*Forgiveness is one word but not one act alone. Forgiveness is the process we live through in order to restore a relationship. Forgiveness is the process of coming back together again with another or with oneself after a separation based on wrongdoing or grievous shortcoming. Forgiveness involves the acknowledgement and, where possible, the mutual recognition of what went wrong, of what we are doing to right the balance, especially of the meaning and the importance of the relationship. Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is anchoring a wrong in its own time, letting it recede into the past as we live and move toward the future [Crosby, *Tree and Jubilee*, p. 54].*

One of the texts I used for my class [Edward M. Hallowell, *Dare to Forgive*] speaks also to the

deeper meaning of forgiveness. The author writes of the source of the word forgiveness, how it comes from an old word meaning, “to set free” [p. 25]. When we forgive each other, and ourselves we can be set free from all the anger and hurt and betrayal that underlie the kind of circumstances that require forgiveness.

But, that’s not to say it’s easy—no, not at all. Why isn’t it? Well, it should be pretty obvious. When we hurt or are hurt badly enough to need forgiveness, we are looking at some pretty bad behaviors, aren’t we? It’s easy to forgive the stranger cutting us off in traffic—after all, how much does his behavior ultimately impact our life? But how do we forgive the big hurts? Particularly the wounds that are inflicted on us by the people we thought we loved or loved us?

Teaching my short course on forgiveness taught me this lesson in spades. It was clear among us in the group that the people who hurt us the most, and whom we either need to forgive or be forgiven by, are also the people we love the most. Love is at the root of hatred and anger. We all know this but when we start to look at the act of forgiveness it becomes crystal clear. It is far easier to forgive the schlub who cuts you off in traffic than it is to forgive the parent who is neglectful. The deeper the connection, the harder it is to let go of the hurt.

And yet, it was also intriguing to me how quickly we all recognized that so much of the anger we were holding toward another was hurting them a lot less than it was hurting us. It is so easy to hang on to anger, isn’t it? We humans seem almost hard-wired for vengeance and retribution. If I hurt, I want others to hurt, too, dammit! Anger can be so fulfilling. How powerful it can seem when we hold our anger and hatred over another, unwilling to let it go.

As Christian theologian and author Frederick Buechner puts it:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief

drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you
[From Wisdomquotes.com].

That powerful image speaks directly to the danger hate and anger inflict on all of us.

Forgiveness is hard medicine, that's for sure. But it may be the only way we can ever heal and move into a future where love and peace are truly possible.

And as critical as forgiveness is for nations, it has to start in our hearts. There is no question that politicians and religious leaders can drum up the energy of hatred and anger to keep people from contemplating forgiveness. But if we start with the big issues—like how in the world to help Israelis and Palestinians learn to live together, or how to fix the issue of racism in our nation—we can far too quickly forget the role that each of us has to play for change to really happen.

Students of politics in Ireland (to use another good example) will tell you that much of the change that is occurring in that once beleaguered land has come about because individual people put aside their fear and hatred, stopped keeping score of wrong or guilt, and reached across the enormous gap to offer and seek forgiveness. It wasn't the only step toward peace but it was a critical one.

And it began in real people's hearts, just as it can in our own. When I listened to story after story in my class of hurt and anger and fear, I felt my own heart break a little. But when each person began to imagine forgiveness, and to see the part they had to play in making it happen, my heart felt the healing energy of love emerging. Forgiveness is that powerful.

It is so powerful that it actually has changed the course of the world. I realize that most of us in this room have at least some knowledge of what happened in South Africa in the late 1990s. Briefly, the awful reign of apartheid, a radical form of national racism ended peacefully. Almost everyone familiar with the situation believed that South Africa would eat itself alive before changing so powerfully. But a miracle really happened. And much of that miracle can

be traced to the door of forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, became a leader of what was called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission was created with the clear understanding that the price of apartheid had been enormous. So many people had been tortured and killed, banished to far away townships, and forced to live in entirely segregated communities. Though it was mostly black Africans that bore the brunt of this racist regime, the Commission understood that whites, too, suffered.

The Commission was developed for two primary reasons. The first was to give all those who had been badly wounded by apartheid the chance to tell their story. Second, it gave those who had done most of the wounding a chance to hear how much their actions had hurt others, to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation, and hopefully receive it.

The stories in Tutu's book are almost too hard to read. The things humans will do to others are truly mind-blowing. People came before the Commission to tell the police and the soldiers and others about the torture they or their loved ones had endured, the incredibly disgusting things that had been done to them, their extraordinary loss and suffering. Many of those who listened and acknowledged their guilt were truly repentant. Others may have been less so. But together, the wounded and the perpetrators of the hurt found a place of meeting. They discovered empathy.

Empathy may lie at the heart of forgiveness. In my class, we all recognized that we had to work hard to understand why someone could hurt us so. But if we could, even if only a little, we went a long way toward forgiveness, if only in our hearts. Desmond Tutu writes of this:

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger.

However, when I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person too.

Moving on is hard but it is the essence of what both Greta Crosby speaks of in her definition of forgiveness:

Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is anchoring a wrong in its own time, letting it recede into the past as we live and move toward the future.

And in Desmond Tutu's own words:

It isn't easy, as we all know, to ask for forgiveness and it's also not easy to forgive, but we are people who know that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future [Tutu, p. 151].

If we want a future where love and community are more common than hate and divisiveness then we, too, must work within ourselves on forgiveness. Such work is spiritually meaningful but also powerfully practical. When we are able to forgive, we set ourselves free to re-build broken relationships, broken communities, broken worlds. It is highly unlikely that there is anyone in this room right now who hasn't been hurt or betrayed in large or small ways. It's also true that each of us here has hurt someone else—intentionally or not. We're human, after all.

Some religions teach that simply by being born human we are innately sinful. And I would agree, in part, that no human is only and always good. But our religion teaches that each of us has inherent worth and dignity. Each of us has *inherent* (meaning it's born in us and can't be taken away) *worth*—that is, our lives are valuable; and *dignity*—we deserve to be treated with and we must treat others with respect, which is what dignity requires of us.

Such a faith calls us toward forgiveness even as we work to right the wrongs of the world. Remember, forgiving is not forgetting. It takes strength and courage to forgive, far more than to hold onto anger and hatred.

As one writer put it:

Forgiveness is much stronger, not to mention much wiser, than vengeance or retribution, and it begets the best kind of justice... Forgiveness bears a greater burden than vengeance ever could. Vengeance lets hatred rule you. Forgiveness overrules hatred. Forgiveness is not only stronger; it is much more clever and wise than vengeance or retribution. Forgiveness takes intelligence, discipline, imagination and persistence, as well as a special psychological strength, something athletes call mental toughness and warriors call courage [Hallowell, p. 27].

The word courage comes from the word meaning heart. It takes heart to forgive, and it takes love. Ultimately that's what it's all about, isn't it? Love. The hard love that comes when we face the reality of hurt and anger with the truth of empathy and compassion.

Can we manifest that kind of love? I know that it will take more love than we can generate in this room to bring about peace in our world. But can't we start here? Can we let go of old hurts and forgive? Can we make up with someone we've hurt by saying "I'm sorry" and really meaning it? Can we forgive ourselves for being imperfect and use the energy we have been employing to beat ourselves up to instead light up the world with love?

It has to start somewhere, doesn't it? Why not right here, right now? In this circle of love we call our church. Why not right here, right now?

[Following the sermon, the congregation did a prayerful process to reflect on who they need to forgive and to whom they need to ask forgiveness.]

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