

Finding Joy . . . Through Forgiving
Ephesians 4:31-32; Matthew 18:21-35

Paul typically presents his theological arguments early in his letters, then moves to practical matters – how to live the faith he’s just been trying to describe. No summary of the Christian life is simpler than that given in Ephesians 4, verses 31-32:

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

For our Gospel today we read Matthew 18, verses 21-35:

21 Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

As I have preached about discovering joy over this past month I have talked a lot about the things that get in the way of joy and what we must do about them. I’ve talked about de-cluttering our lives from material possessions and the manufactured frenzy of the media. I talked about sabbath and the need to separate our identity and happiness from work, and then last week about setting aside our own natural self-centeredness to focus first on the well-being of others. No narcissist knows joy. All these are things we should do to clear the ground for joy to appear. But it struck me as I began this last sermon in the series that so far what I’ve done is give you list of rules and some specific tasks, which is a singularly joyless way to approach the subject of joy. Stop doing this, stop listening to that, start doing this instead of that, and stop being so selfish. All of which is, I think, valid, but I can’t help wondering if I’ve managed to suck all the joy out of . . . you know, joy.

So let me try to approach this last sermon a little differently. Let me give you the gist as simply as possible. One prerequisite for joy is forgiveness – not God’s forgiveness of us, but our forgiveness of others. Joy simply won’t come to us while we are nursing a grudge, harboring resentment, stewing over things others have done to us. So what we need to do is . . . Bother. I was about to give you another rule. I don’t want to just nag, but how am I supposed to talk about forgiving others without telling you to forgive others? And let’s be clear: Jesus doesn’t help. In our passage in Matthew 18 he basically just tells his disciples to forgive. No, he goes farther: he tells them they’d *better* forgive, or else God won’t forgive them. But no pressure.

But we still need to find some other way to approach forgiveness, because to put it bluntly, telling someone to forgive is worthless. It doesn’t work like that. I can tell you to take a sabbath, and you can do it. I can tell you to turn off the constant barrage of cable news, and that’s a thing you can actually do if you choose. But telling you to forgive the former boss who fired you or the co-worker who lied about you or the family member who turned your elderly parent against you or the parent or spouse who abused you or the drunk driver who killed the person you love is singularly pointless. Forgiveness doesn’t happen on command.

Here’s what I think we need to understand: forgiveness is not is not a thing we do. It’s not. It’s not an action, something we do and then are done with. Forgiving an abusive parent, for instance, is not something that will ever be complete. If it can be done at all, it has to be done every time you meet or talk to or think of that parent. Sure, over time it may get easier and more complete, but it’s not something you can do and then check off a list. No, forgiveness, where it exists, is more like a personal characteristic than a one-time action. Let me try to explain what I mean. Take a characteristic like “generosity.” This person is really generous person. But what do we mean by that? We don’t mean that person once gave a nice gift to someone. That’s not enough to qualify as a generous person. Nor do we mean that that person *always* gives gifts to everyone. No, what we mean is that that person frequently, regularly, habitually shares with others. It’s not absolute. Nor is it static, always the same. That generous person has not always been as generous as she is now, and she may be even more generous in the future. It’s a characteristic, not an action.

I think – *I think* – it would help if we thought of forgiveness like this, as a trait rather than a deed. It’s not a thing that we did once or that we always do every time, but rather something that we can grow into over our whole lifetimes. And guess what? That’s biblical, too. Look at the passage we read from Ephesians: *and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you*. Did you see that? It’s weird to see Paul being more tolerant and encouraging than Jesus, but here he is. He talks about forgiveness as a part of a package that includes kindness and tenderheartedness. Neither of those is a one-time action, and neither is forgiveness. It’s a characteristic that we can develop, not a task we can finish. I don’t know about you, but this way of thinking about forgiveness is hugely comforting to me. It means when I fail at forgiveness today, I can take a breath and start again tomorrow. Forgiveness is a habit I can cultivate, which is *so* much better than a command that I can never get right. My goal is not to forgive *x* or *y* so much as it is to gradually become a person of forgiveness.

So let me tell you what a person of forgiveness looks like. It looks kind of like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu was raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the Apartheid

era. Children, this was a time when the government of the South Africa made laws that gave White people full citizenship and special privileges that were denied to Black people. Apartheid simply means “keeping apart.” Whites and Blacks were not supposed to meet or mix or marry. All the leaders, and all the rich people were White, even though most of the population was Black. Servants and day laborers were Black. But the church was different. It did not keep the races separate, and so even though he was Black and therefore not considered fully human by his government, Desmond became a priest, then a bishop, then an archbishop, and from that position of influence led peaceful resistance against Apartheid. But here’s what matters for us today: when finally South Africa gave up Apartheid, when at last Black people were allowed to vote and elected their first Black president, Nelson Mandela, then Mandela asked Desmond Tutu to lead what was called the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” In short, this was a group whose task was to bring past evil out into the open and then to forgive it. Whites who had oppressed or even committed horrible crimes against Blacks were brought face to face with those they had harmed, invited to confess their evil and be welcomed into forgiveness. There is still a part of me that doesn’t quite believe this happened. Just as sometimes it feels incredible that such evil as the Nazi holocaust could have happened, it feels incredible that any government would even for a short time have embraced forgiveness as a policy. But it wouldn’t have happened if the man Desmond Tutu had not, over the course of his life, quietly put aside his anger at the racism in which he had grown up and become instead a man of forgiveness.

I have a friend who’s designing theology lessons for schools. A while ago she sent me a case study she was using in a lesson on forgiveness. The Jewish architect Simon Weisenthal, in 1943, was a prisoner in the Lemberg Concentration Camp. One day Weisenthal was taken from his camp and brought to the bedside of a dying German soldier. The soldier had asked to speak to a Jew before he died. This soldier told Weisenthal how eagerly he had joined the Nazi army and taken part in the murder of hundreds of Jews. He explained – and this is a direct quote from the story – “I wanted Germany to be great again.” But then one day his troop had herded 300 Jews into a house and then tossed in grenades to kill them all. Some tried to climb out the windows, and the soldiers shot them down. One person that this soldier had killed trying to escape was a woman holding a baby. That killing wouldn’t let him go, though. The picture of that woman remained with him. So as he himself was dying, the soldier had sent for a Jew, and he asked Weisenthal to forgive him. Weisenthal turned and walked away.

Years later, Simon Weisenthal – who had never forgotten that moment – still wondered if he had done the right thing. He posed that question to religious leaders around the world. Most said that it would have done no good, that it would have dishonored the dead to give easy forgiveness at a deathbed, or that forgiveness would have led to greater remorse. Only two who replied wished he had forgiven the Nazi soldier. One was the Dalai Lama, and the other was Desmond Tutu.

In my role as pastor, I have talked with people who could not forgive at all, or who could not forgive *that* person or *that* action – people who, if they showed up at the gates of heaven and were told that *that* person was already inside, would choose not to enter. Those are dark conversations. There is no joy in them, for there is no joy in those people.

God, let me never stop growing in forgiveness. Today let me forgive someone anew, or forgive someone a little bit more, or perceive some dark place in my soul where I cling to some festering resentment. Grant me the grace to forgive, for if I do not, how can I ever comprehend your grace and forgiveness for me. Amen.