

Be the church: forgive often

Acts 3:12-19

April 19, 2015

(Strike gavel on pulpit)

All rise! Court is now in session. And the presiding judge is ... you!

You are the judge. You are the judge empowered to pass sentence on every person who has hurt you. You have the power to condemn or to show mercy, to exact punishment -- by taking vengeance or by exiling the offender -- to exact punishment in one way or another or to forgive. What will you do?

Court is now in session. Please be seated.

You were given a pencil this morning with your bulletin. Please open your bulletin and draw two horizontal lines in the large blank space at the end of the bulletin, dividing the space into equal thirds. In the top third, I want you to write the names of the people you have not forgiven. When you are finished, circle one of the names.

Why not? Why have you not forgiven him? Why have you not forgiven her? In the middle third, write down some of the reasons you have not forgiven.

Why not? There are many reasons not to forgive. You have yours and I have mine. It's not that simple, is it? Let me suggest five good reasons not to forgive.

Because the hurt is too great, the injury too grievous. Of course, it is! If there were no hurt, there would be nothing to forgive. Forgiving never means minimizing or denying the hurt. Forgiving always means acknowledging and bearing the pain yourself instead of throwing it back on the one who has hurt you.

Another reason not to forgive: no remorse. He's not sorry. She doesn't take any responsibility for the hurt she caused you. They have expressed no regret. That is a good reason not to forgive, isn't it? It is true, the lack of remorse will certainly make it harder -- much harder -- to forgive, but not impossible. The power is still yours, to exact punishment in one way or another or to forgive.

A third reason: to forgive will give him power over you. Not to forgive gives him power over you!

Or this very good reason: to forgive means taking the risk of being hurt again; forgiving leaves me open and vulnerable to further injury. Yes, it does. But the alternative? To engage only in relationships that are safe? What relationship is entirely safe? Relationships involve vulnerability and the only way to be safe is to have no relationships at all, and that would make for a very lonely existence.

And the last reason on my list, the one nearest and dearest to my heart: I've moved on. I don't need to go back there. I don't need to reopen the wound and bring back all the pain. But the pain has never left, has it? It may be buried deep, but it is there, still hurting you, maybe out of mind, but very much in your heart.

There are many good reasons not to forgive. You have yours and I have mine. It's not that simple, is it?

Yes, it is! Yes, there are complicating factors. Yes, there are risks. Yes, there are no guaranteed results. But you have the choice, you have the power, to forgive or not forgive. It is that simple.

Then why? Why forgive?

Let me tell you about Jeanne Bishop. Twenty-five years ago, in April 1990, sixteen-year-old David Biro used a glass cutter to break into her sister's home in Winnetka, a wealthy Chicago suburb. When Nancy, Jeanne's pregnant sister, and Nancy's husband Richard, returned home, David, their neighbor and a high school track athlete, took them captive, shot Richard in the back of head execution-style and killed Nancy and her unborn child with two bullets fired into her body. David Biro was tried and found guilty of the murders and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Jeanne says:

When he got that sentence, I was glad. It meant I never had to think about the murderer again. I could leave him behind, go forward in my life thinking only of Nancy and Richard and how to honor their lives with my own.

God would not let me. God changed my heart, made me turn and look back, go back to reach out to the killer, to tell him that God loved him, that I forgave him, that he is not alone.

Here is Jeanne talking about her journey into forgiveness ...

sermons.believersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/JeanneBishopForgiveness.mov

"Hating him would give him power over me." This is why forgive, for our own sake, to set ourselves free. "Hating someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."

Jeanne came to that realization quickly. She forgave him and spoke publicly about the faith that led her to forgive her sister's killer. But twenty-two years later, she became convinced -- she became convicted -- that this was not enough, that it is "also about him." In a book on forgiveness, she read this line: "Every Christian has the responsibility to reconcile with those who have wronged them." Not merely to forgive, but to reconcile.

For more than twenty years, she had never spoken David Biro's name, simply referring to him as "the killer," but as God changed her heart, she decided to write him a letter. Here is her letter ...

Dear David,

I scarcely know how to write this, how to begin. I have given it much thought. You know who I am: one of the sisters of Nancy Bishop Langert.

I have heard news of you: how prison has been hard at times because of your association with me and my sisters. I am sorry for that. Nancy was above all about love; she never would have wanted her death to result in more brutality, even to the person who took her life.

You have heard news of me: how I have forgiven you for killing my family members. I never conveyed that forgiveness to you directly; I am sorry for that, too. It was wrong to tell other people and not the most important person of all: you.

She received back from him a fifteen-page letter, admitting his guilt for the first time, making to her a full confession and expressing his regret. Because she offered him forgiveness, they now have a relationship. She has visited him and spoken with him many times over the last two years.

It is not easy and it is not simple. She understands that in many ways he doesn't get it, that he doesn't appreciate the enormity of what he has done and the pain he has caused. He is not there yet and he may not get there. And, in many ways, her family doesn't get it. They don't understand why she is reaching out to him and pursuing a relationship with him.

But she continues to try, to meet with him, to work on this relationship born from forgiveness, despite the obstacles, despite the misgivings, despite the awkwardness, despite the seeming futility. Forgiveness is her choice, her choice for his sake, to do what she can to open for him the door to the possibility of transformation.

"I want him to change," she says. "And the reason for that is connected with Nancy. Because now I really grasp that this sentence is too small for the magnitude of what he took; the only thing big enough would be for him to be redeemed. That's the only thing that seems momentous enough, impossible enough."

"I'm not going to change his heart. That's too big for me. But God can do that."

Forgive often. Be the church! Forgive often. Because that's what we do. Not because they deserve it, not because it works, not because it really doesn't matter, but because it does matter -- to us, because that's what Jesus did -- for us.

We rejected Jesus. We killed Jesus. We still reject Jesus! We still cut him out of our lives! But God raised him to life. God raised him to life to raise us to life, to make possible for us the restoration of a relationship that had been broken. Because of God's forgiveness, we can be made new. We must repent, we must change, we must allow ourselves to be changed, but forgiveness makes it possible.

And it is by our forgiveness that those who have hurt us can be made new. They must repent, they must change, they must allow themselves to be changed, but our forgiveness makes it possible. Our forgiveness is the catalyst. So forgive often. Because that's what God does. Because that's what we do.