

Forgiving God

John 20:19-23

This is a sermon about forgiveness. It's not about forgiving others. It's about forgiving yourself.

Throughout the New Testament we are beseeched to forgive others as we are forgiven. We are forgiven, we are told, by Christ's death on the cross. In this one act of supreme love all scores are settled, all slates wiped clean, all balances righted, all life's mileage set back to zero. We are therefore able – indeed if you listen carefully to today's passage from John we are *empowered* – to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

I believe this. But I also have a problem with it. How do I say this? All of us understand that forgiving others is hard work. Wasn't there a song years ago that said *forgiveness don't come easy*? Are you with me so far? Is there anyone here this morning who can say you carry no judgments, bear no ill will, have no suspicion and you are totally reconciled with all persons and situations in your life?

If there is, would you please excuse the rest of us while we talk?

Here's my point. If forgiving others is hard work, so is forgiving yourself. In fact, I believe that to the extent we have trouble forgiving ourselves we are also going to struggle in forgiving others. You cannot do for others what you cannot do for yourself. So I totally get the message of the New Testament that I was loved from the beginning and I am reconciled to God in the end – and that this is God's work in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Where I am having trouble is in the middle of every day. Do you remember in Matthew's gospel where Jesus says we must forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven? Think that's a lot? Well, by the time I arrive at work in the morning, having glanced at the newspaper, checked my email, listened to the morning news, sneaked a peek at the Red Sox box score and driven my daughter to school through a beehive of driving fools, I have been

shown at least seventy times seven opportunities for forgiveness. And that's before my second cup of coffee!

But where in that morning have I forgiven myself? You see, I understand – intellectually – that I am loved and forgiven. But in practice I am full of judgments about my own shortcomings and sins. In practice I forget what Jesus says this morning – that I have been given -- by the power of his Spirit -- the ability to forgive the sins of any – even my own.

Not only do most of us not forgive, much of the time we don't even notice we're not forgiving! I am so used to judging everything I do or encounters as good or bad, admirable or abominable, I don't even notice that I am given seventy times seven opportunities in the day to forgive myself!

Let me give you a small example.

This past week I joined the Blackberry generation. And here's the breaking news. It's not going well.

As many of you know, I have a thing about technology. I am somewhere south of inept at anything more complicated than a screwdriver. See what I mean? Judgment! But I am ever hopeful. I have often looked with envy at those competent people around me who can do their phone, their calendar and their email all in one little flat box smaller than a wallet and I think to myself....well, maybe someday.

So this past week my cell phone died and there was a sale on Blackberry's at Verizon and I saw my chance to show that I, too, am a "can do" sort of tech-savy, with-it person. What was I thinking? The salesman at the store graciously said to me that I can call him anytime I have a question. But I'm embarrassed to ask: *Which end of the phone do I talk into?* I'm a big boy; I should know these things! And I'm ashamed to ask how to set a ring-tone so I can answer the phone. Real adults ask questions about megabytes and megapixels and something called "apps."

So I have a dilemma. I can persevere with my thumbs until they can "navigate" my contact list and actually call the right person. I can get over my embarrassment and ask how to download the calendar thing. I can learn

not to jump a foot every time my Blackberry cheerily announces I have an email. I can turn the thing off rather than defenestrate it. Great word. Do you know that word, *defenestrate*? Means *throw it out the window*.

My dilemma, you see, is so much more than simply catching up with a new generation of technology. It's also about *forgiving myself*. Who am I to think I'm not competent just because a little black electronic thingee gets the best of me? Who am I to think I'm too old and my thumbs too stiff? Who am I to forget that every change has a learning curve? Why do I feel diminished when other people get it so fast?

Forgiveness is the first step towards wisdom and freedom. Yes? After all, who am I *not* to get through this? Do I not have resources of patience, imagination and a sense of adventure? What is preventing me from using them?

I laugh at myself because it's funny, and there's forgiveness in the laughter. But there's something more at stake here than catching up with the latest gadget. My Blackberry is a sign of a deeper process of forgiveness.

Every day we have opportunities to meet ourselves in the way God greets us. Every day we have opportunities to know beyond any doubt that we are loved. Every day we have opportunities to be healed. To be reconciled. To let go the burden of judgments unasked for. To set free painful memories that keep us trapped in patterns of defensiveness and loneliness. To see our own humanness as competent. In other words, *to forgive*.

This forgiveness, this forgiving of ourselves, is hard work, and requires relentless determination on our part. It requires holding ourselves up in the sight of God every day and realizing for the zillionth time that I – you – we – are wholly loved and God is not done with us yet. That we have an *awesome God* in whom we are truly OK.

There it is, you see. *Underneath our lack of forgiveness is a gnawing doubt that God is good enough or powerful enough to accomplish the miracle of really loving you or me*. Were we to truly believe – not just sing hymns or pray prayers or preach sermons – were we to *trust God* we could look at *all*

things in our lives in the lively expectation that no matter how dark or difficult they appear, we will arrive in time at a place where we see peace fully restored. Not only can we *hope* that this is true, we have been given the *power* – in the company of Jesus, to be sure, not alone – we have been given the power to find that peace.

There's a wonderful book I would love to do a book study on with you. It's called *The Shack*. Have you heard of it? I don't know that *The Shack* is everyone's cup of tea, but it moved me powerfully. It's a novel about a man named Mack who has suffered a terrible tragedy – the murder of his daughter. One day he receives a mysterious note inviting him to come meet God on the very site where the murder took place. Mack can't say no – it may be a hoax but he's got nothing to lose -- and supposing God really will meet him, God has got some explaining to do.

They meet, God and Mack. But what gets unlocked is not the mystery of murder, but the mystery of Mack's heart. Mack's heart has been locked in a chain of doubt and despair he calls *The Great Sadness* that he once received from his own father and is now in danger of passing on to his other children. He does not really trust that God is good enough or powerful enough to break the chain, and he suspects that the death of his daughter is proof of God's powerlessness.

They meet, God and Mack. In a key passage, God says to him simply, that forgiveness is an incredible power, a power Jesus gives to all who share his life. Without forgiveness despair will eat you alive, he says, destroying your joy and your ability to love fully and openly. But, you see, Mack has first to begin to forgive himself for not being powerful enough to save his own daughter. And then he can begin forgiving God for not saving her. And then he can begin his own transformation in which the Great Sadness lifts as he begins to trust that God works life out of death, freedom out of brokenness and light out of darkness.

They meet, Mack and God. Where once Mack's only prayer was, *So, God, explain this to me*, now Mack's prayer is *So, please, God, help me live in the truth*.

God does not need our forgiveness. But that doesn't mean we don't need to forgive God. Forgiveness is asking to face our fears in the deepest trust that God will see us through. The sign that we have forgiven God is that we begin to forgive ourselves – what a miracle that is!

Or, as Jesus says in John's gospel this morning as he breathes the power of the Holy Spirit on the disciples: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* You only begin to realize the power of Jesus' gift when you see that he means: *Begin with yourself and God will do the rest.*

Amen