

FORGIVENESS @ THE CROSS:
*The Manner, Method and Means of Our Ministry Together*¹

²¹Then Peter came up and said to [Jesus], "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

²²Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Introduction

The story is told of a particular Quaker dairy farmer, who possessed a particularly orn'ry cow. Wherein, no matter what the farmer did, every time it came time to milking the cow, it would inevitably kick over its bucket of milk.

Well, one morning, the Quaker had had just about enough. But not being prone to violence, he simply grabbed the cow by the ears, pulled the cow nose to nose and eye to eye, and said: "I shall not curse thee, nor shall I strike thee, nor shall I makest of thee a Rib eye steak. But if thou kickest over one more bucket of milk, I shall surely and most certainly sell thee to a Lutheran."²

Of course, the business of "unforgiveness" is not particular to one denomination of Christ's body or another, nor the fact that we ourselves are just as prone to "shoot the wounded" than save them. But whoever told that joke had in his/her experience, that if you want to be forgiven for something, a Lutheran **might not** be your best bet.

Disciples of the Lord, this should not be! Yes, God forbid that such a thing might be said about you or me, or *any* people who bear the name of Jesus Christ.

Wherein, any who have the ears to hear this morning's Word, will walk away with a renewed promise and pledge to forgive ... which, comes if, and *only* if, that forgiveness flows freely by way of Christ's cross-shaped mercy poured out on us all.

¹ Title adapted from *Sermon Studies on the Gospels*, A, 303

² See also, sermon illustration relating Tennyson's horror at a guest in his home shooting two "peasants" - literally!

Main Point: Let this people of God rejoice in such forgiveness.

Let us revel in the joy that, in Christ, we stand on the other side of the 70 x 7 equation. Wherein, and just as joyfully, **we will graciously live out that forgiveness, without limit, without price!**

FORGIVE *ONLY* AS OFTEN AS *GOD* FORGIVES YOU. FORGIVE *ONLY* WITH THE GRACE THAT *GOD still* GIVES TO US ALL IN JESUS' NAME.

[Adapted from *Sermon Studies on the Gospels (SSoG)*, A, 309]

Amen.

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We have often heard, "to err is human." Where, one commentator aptly notes, "*Not* to forgive is human, too. [That] in our natural human condition ... corrupted by sin, we have no way to reconcile with those who hurt us. Nor do we *want* to. Even as Christians ... we want to remain in control. We like the feeling of having someone in our debt." [Constien, *CPR*, 3:4, 18]

Just ask a certain 26-year-old seminarian, who barely made it out of Seminary [the vote was 2-1], one whose anger was among the driving forces in his life, a man oft-seeking forgiveness, but also – at times – unwilling to fully grant it.

Such is the man standing before you. Where, growing up in an alcoholic home, the wall and the moat I constructed around myself was formed at an early age, each brick laid, and each foot of the trench dug, with deep disdain. That wall would not easily be dismantled, nor the moat filled in. Indeed, anger and [what Philip Yancey calls] "*ungrace*" still seek to have their way with me at times, as I am sure they do with all.

How about you? Do you have, or have you had, a poor relationship with someone in your family: a parent, a brother or sister, or other relative? How about towards a Pastor, or someone else that may have caused you some distress – some situation or circumstance that has given rise to an unforgiving heart?

It is likely that some sitting among us this morning are in "contention with someone: a neighbor, a boss, a fellow worker, a fellow church member ... [Wherein] I recall a story about an elderly man [once] who said that he had no enemies whatsoever.

'How can that be?' someone asked.

'Because I've outlived them all,' he said." ["Handling Offenses and Disagreements," *Proclaim*, 09/09/1990, 2]

But there is Good News in God's house today! Yes, Jesus wants to release you, first and foremost from the debt you owe to Him. Indeed, He has *already* released you, by means of the Cross and of His Passion! Like the Master in Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, He doesn't even think twice about forgiving your sin, dispelling your guilt, leaving in its wake, His *empty* cross; leaving in its wake, a life no longer full of anger and disappointment, a tomb no longer full of the remains of an unforgiving heart. For, child of God, you and I have been set free!

Wherein, not only are we given such assurance – our heavenly Father also has left us with the "manner, method, and means" by which we might now become instruments of that healing grace towards others. Yes, what is left in the wake of *God's* forgiveness is a cross-embroidered and emblazoned heart that is now fashioned by His forgiving grace. Only in Him are we able to "mature in our ability to receive and grant forgiveness." [Constien, 18] Wherein, "as we forgive, we [become] a living advertisement of the life Jesus incarnated, God's way of life and ours." [Kolb, *CJ*, 22:3, 318, 321]

What will be the MANNER of this new life of forgiveness?

First, inviting our heavenly Father by praying for Jesus' blessing. That is, we seek to **GLORIFY GOD**. [The four "G's" as developed by Sande & Kober]

¹⁹Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Only as forgiveness stands in the shadow of the cross, will it GLORIFY GOD. And what a gift God has given to the community of faith to talk with Him! Wherein, since God has given us such a blessed gift as prayer, we "should [never] try to 'go it alone.'" [Constien, 15]

And for what do we pray? That the will of God will be done, that His love reigns supreme, that reconciliation in and through that love will win the day. In times of conflict, "Pray that He will give us appropriate words. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work through our words to touch the [hearts of all]. Pray with confidence that the Father [will] hear our prayer and will graciously grant the blessings we seek." [*SSoG*, 300]

Which means, we will minister to each other with a deep recognition of sin's presence – in all of us ... of making every effort to **GET THE LOG OUT OF OUR OWN EYE.**

Beloved in the Lord, none of us is above sin. None of us is above anger, unforgiveness, or harboring a grudge. O to be sure, many of us would like to think we are. But we brood. We give the silent treatment. We pout, or worse, we spew some vicious venom.

At this point, we've lost our way. We've lost our sight. We've lost the goal of reconciliation – to GLORIFY GOD! To uphold His Word ... to uphold His way of reconciliation – through the Cross.

Instead, let us take "*the more excellent way.*" Let us vow to treat each other with *Christ-like* mercy – mercy in and under the Cross.

To GLORIFY GOD, to GET THE LOG OUT OF OUR OWN EYE, and then – in the third place – to **GENTLY RESTORE**, as we ourselves would seek to be restored ... as God would lead us to **"GO, AND BE RECONCILED."**

Wherein, I'd like to narrow the focus of Jesus' words to us this morning, so that we might now see the METHOD by which we maintain our relationship to one another as God's people in this place.

¹⁵"If your brother [*this* brother – or any brother or sister in Christ – Jesus is more concerned with the Church here, rather than the world ... "*if your brother*"] **sins** ["in an actual, evident, notorious way against a certain Word of God"³ – or if one ever, in some way, is *perceived* to have caused offense] **against you**, [you] **go and** [you] **tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you** [offering you, here and now, my own pledge to do just that – to listen], **you have gained** ["won" – a "mission word"⁴] **your brother.**

¹⁶ *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Jesus makes two life-giving/saving points here ... first:

‡ "You ... **you go ... you take ... you tell.**"

³ Ylvisaker

⁴ Thomas, *CJ*, 16:3, 271; See 1 Corinthians 9:19; 1 Peter 3:1

Wherein, so much hope for reconciliation goes wrong when we choose not to go, but, instead, choose to sit on it, or allow it to well up within, or go and tell others about what's going on, or what we *perceive* to be.

But let us make this solemn vow, refuse to gossip. Refuse to hear another's gossip. Point them back to Jesus, and Jesus' way of reconciliation. "*You*" choose to do this. Wherein, ours is not to avoid, give someone the silent treatment, pout, brood, or spread venom. The goal is, again, God-glorifying reconciliation.

Yes, Jesus' Word to us is not so much an answer to the question "How far do I go before I kick this person out of my life?" Rather, the question is "How far will we go to bring forth a God-glorifying reconciliation when a relationship is strained by sin"? How far will *you* go?

The Bible tells us how far Jesus went, and with great initiative – crossing the universe "*for the sake of the one,*" for you, and for me.

Wherein, the second life-saving/giving truth is:

- ✠ Times of conflict, unless absolutely necessary, must remain a private matter, though if the sin is public, it can and should be dealt with in a public way [see 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Galatians 2:11-14]. Yes, note the progression here, "We go until we have won the brother, or until our private efforts prove to be ineffective and the assistance of others is needed." [SSoG, 297f]

"Restore him in a spirit of gentleness. ... Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. [Galatians 6:1-2]

Baptized and redeemed of Jesus, that *can't* happen when we refuse to honor the Lord's way of doing things. Wherein, the goal is salvation ... the reaffirmation – of Jesus' one-to-one declaration that '**you are mine, you were bought with a price,**' each one individually, privately, as if *you* were the only one that mattered.

Where, in my 30+ years of ministry, thankfully I've never made it to the final step in our Lord's admonition. I've had to go to step two a few times, but thankfully, and by God's grace, not the third step.⁵

⁵ "Excommunication is and must be an act of love. It is the strongest possible preaching of the law, done with holy intent to lead the sinner to recognize and repent of his sin, so that 'his spirit [may be] saved on the day of the Lord' [1 Corinthians 5:5]." [Sermon Studies on the Gospels, A, 299]

Though Scripture clearly teaches that to treat one "*as a pagan or tax collector*" is not to cast them to judgment – that's God's call. Rather, we do as Jesus did. He "*loved*" them, even as he loved his disciples. Where, in love, he preached to them and prayed for them. [SSoG, 299] In love, He died and rose for them ... as sure as He did for all!

Whose death and resurrection earns Him the right to say, "*Go ... one on one ... one on one, with witnesses ... with and to the Church. Do whatever it takes to bring one [sheep] home rejoicing. Do whatever you must do to bring one home to God.*"

Where, Jesus assures us:

¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you [ya'll] bind on earth shall be [lit. "will have been"] bound in heaven, and whatever you [ya'll] loose on earth shall be ["will have been"] loosed in heaven.

Such is the MEANS of our mutual ministry and life together as Christ's people in this place – to announce – with joy – a forgiveness already firmly fixed in heaven. Realizing, that forgiveness is never a numbers game. But rather, "*a continuing and constant obligation of love ... with no limits at all.*" [SSoG, 306]

Conclusion

Where, all told, who will we be? Helmut Thielicke says, "*We are (but) echoes. ... [E]choes of what? Either echoes of intrigue, chicanery, [and] the meanness that is around us, [wherein] then we ourselves become scheming, cheating, and mean. Or we are echoes of Jesus Christ and therefore, echoes of that forgiving, renewing, creative love that comes to us from the Father. [Wherein] we ourselves become loving, renewing, forgiving, creative, and positive.*" [Our Heavenly Father, 113]

Since the beginning, the Church has been about the latter ... echoes of mercy that ring to heaven itself. Wherein, there was a God who once left heaven, to bring His lost ones home, and heaven's angels rejoiced! Inspire heaven to rejoice again, every time a family, a friendship, a fellowship is restored and healed ... not because someone came begging mercy from us, but because, long before that, we first went to them.

FORGIVING ONLY AS OFTEN AS GOD FORGIVES ... FORGIVING **ONLY**
WITH THE GRACE THAT GOD now GIVES TO US ALL IN JESUS' NAME.

Amen!