

The Good and Beautiful Life
Forgiveness
Colossians 3:12-17

Pastoral Call to Worship

The novelist Paulo Coelho has this wonderful quote in his book *The Zahir*:

“I must try to enjoy all the graces that God has given me today. Grace cannot be hoarded. There are no banks where it can be deposited to be used when I feel more at peace with myself. If I do not make full use of these blessings, I will lose them forever.

God knows [he said] that we are all artists of life. One day, he gives us a hammer with which to make sculptures, another day God gives us brushes and paints with which to make a picture, or paper and a pencil to write with. But you cannot make a painting with a hammer, or a sculpture with a paintbrush. [You can only use the instruments that are in your hands today.] Therefore, however difficult it may be, I must accept today’s small blessings, even if they seem like curses.”

The Psalmist whose writings are part of our Hebrew Scriptures said something very similar: “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in this day.”

I would add: This is the moment we have arrived for worship. It may not be perfect. This church is probably not all that God hopes for it to be.

I’m pretty sure none of us is yet what God intends for us to be.

You may not have finished what you hoped to get done before you got here.

You may be worried about what came before, or what is coming later.

But this is the moment we have come to.

This is the place where we are.

These are the people who are here, right next to you, because they are holding some gift God wants to give you today.

Welcome. All things are ready. The gifts of God for the people of God.

Sermon

All month long, we are talking about the good and beautiful life. The kind of life we want for ourselves. The kind of life that—if we were to really live it—might be our best gift to the world. The best evidence that there is a good God, and that life can be better with God in it. I heard someone say once, “You may be the only Bible someone reads.” That sounds a little confusing to me, but I think this is what it means: that in this post-Christian world we live in, how you live may be the closest look other people get to the story of God’s deep and unwavering love, the kind of love that can reshape a life.

One by one, Paul lists in that one paragraph in his letter to the Colossian church the qualities of this life. Today we focus on one more of those qualities: forgiveness. *If someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.* This is not a surprising piece of advice. Paul didn't make it up on his own. 'Forgive the people who hurt you' was kind of a mantra of Jesus.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, he taught his disciples to pray. (Matthew 6:12)

How many times do I have to forgive someone who does wrong by me? someone asked Jesus. Three times? Four? Seven? *Seventy times seven,* Jesus answered. You just keep forgiving, however many times it takes. (Matthew 18:22)

You mean forgive them eventually, don't you? *No,* he said. *I mean right now. If you have to get up out of your seat in the middle of church to go find the person you've gotten sideways with, go do it...now.* (Matthew 5:21-26)

You mean forgive my friends who hurt me by mistake, right? *Nope,* he said. *I mean forgive your enemies too*—the people who want to do you harm. (Luke 6:27)

Forgiveness is at the heart of who Jesus was, the trademark of God he brought with him into human life. Several years ago I asked Fred Luskin, the founder of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford to come and talk to a congregation I was leading at the time. He looked around the sanctuary, with Christian symbols all around him, and he said, "I'm not sure why I'm here. Aren't Christians supposed to be the experts on forgiveness?" He was right. Forgiveness is at the center of the message of Jesus. The immensity of love that comes from a God who does not keep track of wrongs, the kind of forgiveness that keeps stretching to include every one of us, no matter what we've done in the worst moments of our lives: that's right at the heart of the good news Christianity offers. It's the motivating principle for a life of Christian faith.

But that doesn't mean that forgiving each other is easier for Christians than it is for other people. Or that we forgive other people naturally. In fact, forgiveness is a spectacularly unnatural thing to do, even for people of faith. Whether it's for something as small as someone hurting your feelings or as large as being the victim of act of violence, the human and natural thing is to insist on fairness, to wait for an apology, at least remorse, from the wrongdoer. That's how we gauge whether the other person deserves our forgiveness. These are the rules humans live by. Forgiveness is a transaction. Insist that your rights get seen. Be part of making sure that everyone gets what they deserve.

When Jesus and Paul tell us to forgive regularly, they're asking of us something that does not come naturally. Because forgiveness steps right over that human preference for making sure that wrongs get fully addressed. It asks us to put aside the wounded parts of us that still feel hurt, that voice that lobbies inside our heads to put a few conditions on this relationship so that we can work out some justice here. We have to cock our heads in a different direction to hear the voice of God that says, 'Let it go. I'll take care of making things right.' Forgiveness calls on us to remember that God is the justice-maker...and even God forgives.

Maybe that's why Jesus talked about forgiveness so often. He knew it wouldn't be easy for us to be bigger, more open-hearted, more vulnerable people than we are inclined to be on our own. No doubt that's why Paul included it in this list of character qualities that church people even in the first century had to be reminded of. In the class that Stanford professor Michael Penn has been leading in our Wednesday night School of Christian Living, he had us read this week a quote from Ignatius, one of the first bishops of the Church. In around 110 AD, barely seventy years into this movement of Christ-followers, Bishop Ignatius said, "I don't want to [just] be *called* a Christian. I want to *be* a Christian." How did that distinction happen so fast?

I want to stop for a moment and acknowledge that there are questions about forgiveness that can take us into very thorny ethical issues. It's not hard to imagine the most egregious wrongs and ask whether the people who did them can be or should be forgiven. There are ethical dilemmas that stretch our thinking to the very edge of what crimes against humanity are forgivable. But that's not what we're talking about today. This sermon is not about Hitler or Pol Pot, or the perpetrators of domestic violence, or the sponsors of human trafficking.

This sermon is about us. When Paul wrote "If someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other," he was writing to people like us, about how we live our ordinary lives. In Paul's metaphor, it's about the wardrobe of character traits that we get up and put on every morning, the shoes and socks we wear at home and work and church and school.

All this week, no doubt because I was thinking about this sermon, I noticed how many times the need for forgiveness came up. My feelings got hurt because someone in my family didn't include me in an invitation. A colleague handled something in a way that made me feel unseen, disregarded. I was conscious of a sharpness in my voice when I talked to somebody I see regularly. I thought he must notice it too, and I am sorry for that. Every day something difficult happened that I could choose either to tuck into or let go from my relationship with that other person. Every day. And I live alone! If you live with other people, you have even more opportunities to forgive...or not.

It is so natural to let an injury capture us and hold our attention. We are inclined to nurse our pain, to turn that hurt over and over in our minds, to feel its sting again and again. That's the meaning of the word "resentment" actually. It comes from the French verb *resentir*, which means—literally—"to feel again".

Don't do that, Paul says. Let it go, Jesus taught. Forgive—no matter how hurt you are.

Why should we do this? Why stretch for another way, if what comes naturally is to hold a grudge, or even hit back to make sure the ledger is evened? There are a whole bunch of good psychological reasons. Do it because forgiveness is less stressful and better for your cardiovascular health than holding on to anger. That's what the Forgiveness Project would tell you.

Years ago—long enough ago that all its students were males—Harvard University began a longitudinal study of the happiness of its graduates. The study paired two groups: one, a group that had gone through Harvard and had all the privileges and benefits that go with that credential.

The other, a group of men from South Boston, who had never gone to college, and who worked most of their lives in the kinds of jobs that we call ‘blue collar’. Every decade, through those men’s nineties, the researchers checked back in with them to see how they were doing. They expected to see a consistent correlation between economic and professional success and happiness. At a few of their marking points they did find that to be true. But by the last decades of their lives, the Harvard study found that only two factors consistently accounted for those men’s happiness: their ability to take new people into their lives (i.e., to make new friends), and the ability to forgive. Because the wrongs we could count and hold onto accumulate over a lifetime.

Forgiving other people will make you a happier person. Maybe because the converse is so clearly true: Holding on to the pain other people cause you—not forgiving—will make you an *un*-happy person. Maybe that’s enough reason for you to forgive someone today. But I know that my resolutions to do only what’s good for me often fall short. That cupcake tasted really good this week. And massaging my hurt feelings is a pattern that’s hard for me to break.

People of faith have a far more powerful reason than self-care to practice forgiveness. Because we know—we take in, we chew and swallow the symbols of it every month when we come here and gather around a loaf of bread and a cup of juice—that we too have been forgiven. Sometimes I need forgiveness for my mistakes. And sometimes—more often than I’d like to admit—I need forgiveness because I do things that are mean, unkind. Apparently neither one of those can throw God off his game. No matter what we’ve done, no matter how many times we fail to live up to our promises or our potential, whether we apologize the right way or not, the God of the universe is waiting for us with open arms, offering to put the past behind us, saying ‘*I just love you, that’s all. Come.*’

I think the significance of forgiveness is that it’s really the most extreme form of love. It’s love without asking somebody to deserve it first. It’s returning to love even after the thread of it has been broken. It’s giving up the expectation that love is a transaction with equal measures on both sides. That’s how God loves us, again and again and again. Sometimes I think that if we really understood that, if we could really take in how unconditionally we are loved, how many times every day we *receive* forgiveness, it would change everything. Certainly it would change the totals on that scorecard I keep in my head.

If you want to live a beautiful life—the kind of life that’s symbolized in that picture of a little girl who is free to swing as high as her little legs will pump her—*get rid of the scorecard*, God is saying to us today. *Because I have.*