

“The Whole World is Watching”

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The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

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Scriptures: Matthew 18: 21-35

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold^[b] was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow

servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.^[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The whole world is watching.

People notice.

Folks observe.

The persons around you are taking stock.

I'm not trying to make you paranoid, like the Ziggy poster that reads,

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not talking about you!"

The world is really, truly watching.

They – and we – are looking for signs of hope,

searching for signs of grace,

looking for examples and mentors to teach us

how to act in times of hatred and fear,

in such a time as this of violence and separation,

in an era of discord and disunity and disharmony.

We live in a deeply fragmented and broken world,

and the whole world is watching for signs of healing and forgiving love.

The whole world is watching to see how you react and respond.

And well they should: you bear the mark of Christ.

You who have been baptized, who belong to the Shepherd and know His voice,

you who have been fed by the Bread of Life,

you who have had your thirst quenched with Living Water,

you who are seeking a brighter and kinder way,

a more harmonious path and means of being,

you who discern that there is more power in love than hate,

more power in re-membering than discarding,

more power in reconciliation than self-righteousness,

you, my friends, are being observed.

The whole world is watching, wondering, questioning.

What should we do?

What's the next step?

What is wrong with only looking out for number one?

Where do we go from here?

Who do we trust and follow and serve?

Is there a gesture, an act, a practice, a people that makes a difference?

The world around us – and within us, yes? -- needs to know and believe,

wants to know and believe,

craves to know and believe

that God is love,

and that the love of God is made manifest
today.

Is there is a greater way to make manifest the love of God in Christ

than to forgive someone, or maybe even a lot of someones?

Sick and tired of being sick and tired,

the whole world is watching for a sign of Good News.

Could it be that the Good News we seek and desire

is that the power to forgive – and to forget –

is alive and well, has already been given unto you,
and abides with you forever and ever...?

You are the living proof of the power of forgiveness. Praise God!

Paul said, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* (Phil. 4:13)

Yes, we can.

Indeed, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

We can emulate and embody the hardest, most challenging,
yet most gratifying and life-changing, life-giving, life-sustaining
spiritual discipline there is: to forgive.

People are watching, craning their necks and heightening their senses
because,

at the core of our collective consciousness,
the whole world wants to know that forgiveness exists,
that the seemingly impossible is, in fact, possible.

The whole world is watching.

One morning Mrs. O'Flaherty went into the confessional booth,
she noticed an unfamiliar face behind the screen shutter.

"You're not our regular priest," she said.

"What are you doing here?"

The man said, "I'm the custodian, and today I'm polishing the furniture."

“Well,” she said, “where is Father Dolan?”

“Ma’am, I couldn’t tell you,” he said, “but if Father Dolan heard anything
like the stories I’ve been listening to,
best bet is he has gone for the police.”

In his work called An African Prayer Book,

Desmond Tutu tells of

*“A [gentleman who] had a particular besetting sin,
and he used to confess it
and God would forgive him.*

But no sooner had he been absolved

then he would trip up and sin again.

*One day this happened, and he rushed back to God and
said,*

‘I’m sorry, I’ve done it again.’

And God said, ‘What have you done again?’”

“God,” writes Desmond Tutu,

“suffers from amnesia when it comes to our sins.

God does not look at the caterpillar we are now,

but at the dazzling butterfly we have in us to become.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus bids us to ask God to forgive us

as we forgive those who have wronged us.

Not to forgive others is to shut the door to our own being forgiven."

(Desmond Tutu, An African Prayer Book, 1995, P.38)

Desmond Tutu, the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Scriptures,

and your own beautiful faith point you toward

the incredible, amazing truth that God forgives

-- and forgets -- our repented sins.

When it comes to our confessed sins,

the amnesia of God is a spiritual attribute

we are encouraged to claim...and emulate.

The Good News is that God covenants with us

to not hold our confessed sins against us.

Accepting this as a starting point is the easy part.

Here is the hard part, my friends.

Here is the part that makes us uncomfortable and afflicts our consciences:

As God has forgiven us,

so we are to grant forgiveness to one another.

The whole world is watching.

Jesus never said following him would be a rose garden.

He should know, for he smelled the fragrance and felt the thorns.

There is a wonderful legend

that comes out of the Southern African-American tradition,

a legend known as the "Fourth Temptation."

According to the story,

after Jesus was tempted three times by the devil in the wilderness,

Jesus was led forth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He emerged to live a beautiful and courageous
life.

After he emerged he called to him followers, fickle and faithful and
fun,

some of whom betrayed him or denied him or abandoned
him

or stayed at a distance when he needed them
most.

After he was crucified he hung on the cross,

enduring unbelievable pain, when the devil returned as
promised.

Satan whispered in Jesus' ear, *"They aren't worth it, Lord."*

It was then that those who stood by the cross at the feet of Jesus

heard the Master say aloud,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

(Luke 23: 34; legend attributed to Paul Wellman, The Chain)

According to the Holy Scriptures,

after the resurrection event Jesus appeared to the disciples.

He still bore physical scars, evidence of the violence of crucifixion.

He still bore emotional scars,

the painful memories of friends who slept while he prayed,

of Peter’s three denials of his personal connection with Christ.

After the resurrection Jesus sent angels with messages of mercy.

After the resurrection Jesus appeared to Peter

and three times called him to feed and love God’s flock.

After the resurrection

Jesus Christ encountered Saul and souls like you and me,

offering to us a life-changing experiences

and a life-giving, death defying fresh start.

After we have been forgiven by Christ,

after the redemption of our souls, we, too, are to forgive...and to forget.

The whole world is watching.

A little boy named Kwami was having trouble with a playmate.

One day in Sunday School

he heard the story of Jesus' conversation with Peter,
the one about the day Peter asked that excellent question,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister
who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

It seemed to both Peter and Kwami as if seven was an astronomical
amount!

Jesus said to Peter, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

So the next time Kwami saw his playmate,

he said, “Buddy, I'll forgive you 490 times,

but after that you are in trouble!” (adapted
from Lectionaid)

Ah, this serves to remind us of our very real human tendency

to put limits and boundaries on things

that Jesus teaches us are infinite and boundless.

We have a tendency to draw lines in the sand and say,

“I will love you thus far but no farther!”

However, the Lord we serve and love erases all lines and says, in effect,

“I will love you forever, and, see, I lay down my life for you.”

Through the example of Jesus Christ

and the presence of the Holy Spirit,

God offers us not only the gift of being forgiven,

but also the grace to give such a gift to one another.

We are blessed to receive from the Spirit of God

a clean slate with which to start each day anew.

At the same time we are blessed to be able to extend to one another

a clean slate and to say, "I am praying for you and I forgive you."

Forgiveness begins when someone takes the initiative.

Someone has to start the ball rolling, to begin the process.

Take heart: the initiative has already been taken, the first step already made!

"God demonstrates [divine] love for us in this:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

All the world has this divine power, for it comes from God.

Jesus told us, *"Truly I tell you,*

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Jesus also said, *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven."*

What power we have, thanks to the grace of God!

The whole world is watching for authenticity.

Let's be real here.

Practicing the art of forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened.

It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything is okay.

It isn't.

Forgiveness is not saying that we never feel the pain of being wronged.

We do.

Forgiveness is an attitude;

it is a way to approach life;

it is our greatest challenge and our mightiest joy

in the practice of our faith.

Anne Lamott said, *"I am not one of those Christians*

who are heavy into forgiveness. I am the other kind."

Have you ever forgiven someone seven times? Really?!

When Jesus told Peter, "Seventy times seven,"

He might as well have said, "Seven thousand times seven."

Forgiveness is always the answer.

Is there anyone here who does not feel like he or she ever needed to be forgiven?

Have you found that the hardest person to forgive is yourself?

And after that, it may be the people we see and touch the most?

Grace is such a wonderful gift of God.

Grace is freeing, liberating, enlightening.

When we forgive we are freed.

We are freed from harboring grudges,

freed from the need to get revenge or to get even,

freed from a self-righteousness and self-centeredness,

freed to be free in Christ,

to be united with God and one another.

Personal forgiveness is about how you practice the art in your relationships.

Where do you need to put this discipline into practice?

However, this spiritual discipline doesn't end at one on one;

that's only the beginning of the journey!

"One plus one plus one makes a million."

Communal forgiveness is essential, vital, even,

for the redemption of our so-human community and the global village.

The whole world is watching, and remembering.

Recall that in 1995 and '96,

a large number of churches were burned to the ground
across the South and Southwest,
including a disproportionate amount
of African-American church buildings.

My family worshiped God in a Christian Church in Jackson, Tennessee.

Our congregation rallied to the cause:

we worshiped alongside one such congregation and helped
rebuild.

Week of Compassion dollars helped raise necessary funds.

At the time Johnny Wray was the director of Week of Compassion.

At the city-wide ceremony to celebrate the rebuilt sanctuary,

we invited Johnny Wray to go with us and participate.

Before the service Johnny was speaking with a group of children,

and he asked them if the people

who had burned down their original building had been
caught.

An eleven-year-old girl looked Johnny in the eye and said,

"I don't know if the arsonists have been caught,

but I do know that we prayed for them

and that we already forgave them.”

The whole world is watching.

Look who is noticing.

My friends, I shared that same story,

the one about the forgiving love of a child and her church,

at the Decatur Rotary over ten years ago,

and ten days ago a Rotarian came up to me and,

with a choked voice and tears in his eyes,

repeated it back to me *word for word*.

The world is looking for a sign of hope.

We want to stand on the street and shout as one, *“Move that bus!”*

Rebuilding houses starts with rebuilding souls, and relationships, and homes, and nations.

Deep down in our souls we know, we believe, we celebrate

that forgiveness is true,

but we, like the world, sometimes need to be reminded;

sometimes we need to be affirmed in our practice;

sometimes we need to be taught and, yes, re-taught to forgive.

The whole world is watching.

My mother, Buffy Calvert, tells a true story about a dispute

between the children of two neighboring families.

One thing led to another and before they knew it

best friends were worst enemies.

The mother of one of the families prayed with her children,

made some brownies,

and then told her children to take them next door.

The kids didn't want to go.

They finally gave in and reluctantly walked across the yards.

In that simple gesture of reconciliation,

the incident was over and all hearts and minds were healed.

Simple gestures of grace can and have moved mountains

of misunderstanding and loss between individuals and nations.

We have this power to forgive, thanks to the grace of God.

Our hearts and minds are prepared by God for grace.

In the midst of our workaday lives,

there are ample opportunities for healing and reconciliation.

Pray for such opportunities; pray for deliverance.

Buffy Calvert concluded her story about the two neighboring families

by saying, *“Forgiveness, like every other muscle,*

becomes stronger with each use.

The more you practice being forgiving, the easier it becomes

until it becomes a habit, a spiritual habit so common to you

that you naturally forgive quickly without harboring grudges.”

The whole world is watching,

watching for someone to embody and emulate forgiving love.

Imagine a world without forgiveness.

Without forgiveness

our two tenets of faith and hope

turn inward and tumble to the ground.

Now envision a world looking and seeing,

seeking and suddenly believing and finding love and forgiveness,

twin gifts of a Living Hope

who has the power to bring people together

to remember,

to reconcile,

to rebuild,

to reach for new
heights and new life.

All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material:

"I think joy and sweetness and affection are a spiritual path.

We're here to know God,

to love and serve God,

and to be blown away by the beauty and miracle of nature.

You just have to get rid of so much baggage

to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play.

You don't have time to carry grudges;

you don't have time to cling to the need to be right."

(Anne Lamott interview in The Washington Times)

Maybe the first question we have to ask ourselves when it comes to forgiveness is this: Do I want to be right or do I want to be reconciled?

A full courtroom in metropolitan Atlanta was brought to tears when a Disciples of Christ minister forgave a contrite high school student whose reckless driving caused the death of the pastor's wife and mother of their children. The courtroom story was published in the local paper under the heading, "Athlete Grapples with Guilt, Gratitude" (By Curtis Bunn, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 21, 2008).

Bryce Dykes' Jeep Cherokee struck the rear of the Michael and Linda Zhu's Nissan Altima. Linda Zhu, who was riding in the back seat, was rushed to Atlanta Medical Center. She died. Dykes was charged on March 30, 2007, with homicide by vehicle in the second degree. There was no evidence of speeding, alcohol or drug use. An investigation determined he was following too closely. Dykes eventually pleaded guilty to reckless driving. He and his family asked permission to attend the wake of Linda Lin Zhu. The Rev. Zhu agreed. At the viewing, he embraced Dykes, who wept. The two men came together once more at the sentencing hearing. Dykes, crying the entire time, addressed the Zhu family, apologizing for his actions while asking for forgiveness.

"It's the most emotional thing I've ever seen in 23 years of doing this," said Drew Findling, the lawyer representing Dykes. "That one hour captured the emotions of everyone there: the judge, deputies. . . . It was draining for everyone."

Zhu had already planned to ask the judge for leniency toward

Dykes. "That is the attitude I have in this life," he said. "It's my philosophy on the way to live." Zhu said he was made aware by his lawyer and others that Dykes is "a good kid, good football player" and National Honor Society member. "And I saw that he was a good person because he didn't hit-and-run. And he was very honest," he said. "When he spoke, he was crying. He was sincere. I knew it. He was very sorry and regretful. Also, as a parent of a 16-year-old [son], it was very easy for me to put myself in his parents' shoes. I told the judge: 'There should be a balance. We should keep the integrity of the law. But we also should teach.'"

Zhu said he is behaving the way he thinks his wife would want. "Everybody makes mistakes," he said. "Hating doesn't help. Hating cannot bring Linda back to life. It's most important how you deal with it and provide a future for the living ones. My wife would do the same thing. If I meet her in heaven, she will say I did the right thing." (AJC, 4/21/08)

Here are some steps toward forgiving someone whom you think has wronged you, steps that are both practical and spiritual which you might find helpful.

First, acknowledge that you have been hurt or injured, spiritually, mentally, or physically. Do so in such a way as to not compound the situation. For example, write a letter and articulate everything you feel and think and remember. Write the letter but do not send it. This is one of the challenges of email – we write a note and quickly, thoughtlessly click on send. Instead, consider letting your letter sit in your draft folder for a while and become a part of the healing process. Sometimes by simply unloading our troubled minds to ourselves and the Holy Spirit we discover peace and healing and the ability to forgive. Often times this is enough.

Secondly, pray for the one who has wronged you. You may wonder

why prayer isn't the first action item. Well, praying comes in a close second and not first because it is hard to pray before we acknowledge that something is off kilter. When you pray for the soul and spirit of one who has hurt you, you may discover that, rather than nursing the anger which is within you, you are spiritually nursing the spirit of another person in need. One of the mottos being carried in our congregation is, "Be kind; you do not know the burdens people carry."

Third, talk to a trusted person. Be wise by not telling your story to someone who listens in order to hear gossip or who might only add fuel to the fire. Rather seek out a trusted spiritual guide who can offer a Christ-like presence.

Further, don't rush the process. Take the time required to get to the point where you can truly forgive from your heart. There is no statute of limitations on grief or anger or personal pain. Time and the gracious love of God do heal all wounds. In our collective midst are people of faith who have articulated the pain and challenge of life after grievous wrongs. For example, Holocaust survivors speak of remembering the sins done against them lest lessons not be learned, lest history be repeated, lest yet another genocide begin. Their goal is to remember as a part of the journey toward reconciliation, not revenge. Does memory pass away? Can we ever truly forget? Should we? With the blessed gifts of time and grace, let us seek to move toward a place where memories of past abuses that haunt and harm us still become instead a part of our healing and hope.

Finally, when you are ready, speak or write to the person directly, sharing what you think and feel, and saying that you forgive him or her. Sometimes there is a gap between forgiveness and reconciliation. This happens when one party forgives but the other neither desires nor works toward being reconciled. Seek both anyway. Sister Helen Prejean hit the nail on the head when she said, *"Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won."*