

## **Forgiveness and your future**

**June 18, 2023. Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

Text: And Peter went up to him and said: 'Lord how many times must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as 7 times?' And Jesus answered, "Not seven I tell you, but seventy seven times."

This Sunday is Indigenous People's Sunday as well as Father's Day. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has apologized for its treatment of native children in residential schools. It is available on line in the form of a confession. It is part of a study guide. The discovery of unmarked graves has been very sobering for the Church. We understand much better now the deep, deep hurt that the church caused.

Over the years I have spoken in the pastor's office with those who had an abusive relationship with their own father. It affected their whole understanding of God as Father. Many just could not go there, nor sing a hymn with the word father in it, nor were they able to forgive their earthly fathers.

There are many of us who had wonderful fathers. I'm one and I am so grateful as I know so many of you are for your dad. I adored my dad. A young woman said to me on Sunday, "I just love my Dad, he is so kind to others..."

But both these issues lead me this morning to speak about forgiveness. Who is it for? The victim or the perpetrator or both? When we create a victim and are sorry about that, we can never demand forgiveness. We can ask, but there is no obligation for the victim to forgive, especially when the hurt is deep. We need to understand that!

I was watching a historic piece of film footage- the celebrations of the reunions of Allied prisoners of war and their Japanese captors at the Bridge over the River Kwai. Only three former allied POW's who had been slave laborers, walked across the bridge to shake hands with former Japanese captors. In fact, many POWS boycotted reconciliation ceremonies and planned their own services to exclude all Japanese. Why? They said that the atrocities were too deep to forgive. But the miracle was this: Three POWS managed it! There were

one hundred Japanese asking for forgiveness. Reconciliation was actually offered by these three victims.

In another case however on the same river Kwai, Scottish soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors to labor on a jungle railroad, had degenerated to barbarous behavior, but one afternoon something happened. A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot . . . It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first checkpoint. The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! . . . The incident had a profound effect. . . The men began to treat each other like brothers. When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, now human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors (and instead of attacking their captors) insisted: "No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we all need is forgiveness."

It's so much easier to ask for forgiveness than to give it, isn't it? Particularly when the hurt runs deep!

Yet if forgiveness does not work in the hard cases, it does not work at all. Are we prepared to say it does not work in the hard cases? If so, just what are we left with?

Are we not left with an insoluble problem in human nature that pretty well explains many of the problem spots in the world?: The Middle East, India and Pakistan over Kashmir, China and Tibet, terrorism, race problems, the war in Ukraine and the way we have treated native people's throughout the world and here in Canada.

It is also a center of a wilderness in our families and in the victim's families of those who have been abused, murdered, raped, beaten or accused unjustly and imprisoned. How do we forgive ten years in prison for a crime we did not commit? I know a young man called Frankie in California who was in prison on

death row for 18 years. A good friend of mine took his case on and finally proved that he had not committed the crime. The day came when Frankie came to speak at my church and he was just amazing. He had chosen to forgive those who put him there.

A large part of his life was gone. He was determined to make up for his loss by choosing forgiveness. Why? Because it set **him** free!

So few families are perfectly happy. Somewhere in the closet is a skeleton of some dysfunctional relationship. The same sort of thing happens in our work places and in our not for profits and in our churches.

But you say, “David, that’s human nature and there is not much we can do about it. I think that we just have to live with it!”

When, the last millennium closed, over 100 million people had perished in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And so many of them were little children. Donald Shriver in his book An Ethic for Enemies said: “When what is stolen is the laughter of children, what then? How can you give back the laughter of children?”

Perhaps in our personal lives things may not be too bad. We get along well with our friends and bond deeply in times of adversity. But we are really not too willing to forgive, especially when we figure that we’ve been done a disservice or injustice of some kind. Privately we think that forgiving in a situation like that is basically up to the saints, or a Jesus Christ who managed to forgive his tormentors even as they spat upon him.

But we? We can’t do it; it’s too hard!

The problem with this kind of thinking, though, is that we are going to have to accept the world exactly as it is, our private world and the big world out there too.

There will not be the quantum leap in human consciousness that will be required for the human race to survive for us and for our children. The wars will go on and on. They will be inevitable and our families and organizations to which we belong will bump along in the same old way.

I want to ask the question- do we have to be saint material in order to forgive?

In South Africa Archbishop Peers was being driven through a Black Township before the end of Apartheid.

His drivers? Two native South African nuns. At that time, it was a criminal offence to transport a black person with a white person. Soon Archbishop Peers and the nuns were being followed by a police car. The police pulled them over and approached. The white cops started to verbally abuse the nuns in an attempt to terrify them with the dire consequences of their actions. The archbishop was really afraid as he sat in the rear of the automobile. But the two nuns sat in the front of the car as if in church. Eventually the police left, perhaps afraid of creating an international incident with Archbishop Peers. After the ordeal the archbishop said to the nuns “How did you remain so calm? Were you praying for survival?”

One nun smiled in a way that the archbishop had never seen before and said: “We were absorbing their hatred. Perhaps if we take enough of it on ourselves, they will be healed.”

I once talked with a Jewish friend who was a victim of the Holocaust. He said that forgiveness for him was simply impossible. For him only one thing remained: Justice - bringing people to trial and vengeance.

If it were you or I, might we not think the same way?

Is it just too much to ask a Holocaust victim to forgive hatred and injustice? Well, what do you think? If we had thought their thoughts, walked in their shoes and been there in the prison camp would we be advocates for forgiveness?

But consider this: **If we as a species do not learn how to forgive one another, we will lose the future.** I was listening to a contemporary philosopher on CBC radio. Susan Neiman who has written a book called Why Grow up? Subversive thoughts for an infantile age, was being interviewed. She was saying that we live in a very dark time of history. Because of our failure to grow up as a species, we might very well lose the planet by the end of the next century. Since WW2 over 9 trillion dollars have been spent on armaments-enough to have eradicated poverty on the planet several times; enough to have saved the lives of countless children worldwide and given them a future instead of despair and a slow death by malnutrition.

Why may we well lose the planet? Lack of forgiveness plays into limited loving, unlimited greed and our dog- eat- dog competition and an unregulated capitalism. Wars which are big business will continue. So will exploitation, injustice and vengeance. We will spend ever more on law enforcement. We will get tougher on crime. What has this to do with the planet?

Because in order to reverse Climate change; shut the hole in the ozone layer, reduce world population to sustainable levels, repair the forest cover, unpollute the water, oceans and air...WE WILL HAVE TO COOPERATE! It is our failure to cooperate, which is leading us to the edge of the abyss. If we are going to cooperate we have to learn how to forgive, for everyone makes mistakes and very frequently we have been taught to hate rather than forgive.

It is now a very real question will life survive on this planet? Will it continue to be a home for our children's children or even for us? This is the inconvenient truth Al Gore wanted us to face. But are we facing it?

The forest fires across Canada say no. The planet is warming due to overuse of fossil fuels worldwide and there is not the willingness to cooperate that is needed for us to follow the science.

Failing to cooperate, which is at the base of why we don't want to grow up, can be traced back to a failure to forgive. Forgiveness and trust are also linked. Things happen very quickly with trust and we need speedy action.

If we accept failure to forgive one another as normal behavior, we may very well destroy ourselves and the planet along with ourselves.

Is forgiveness too hard for us? Remember Judas Iscariot. Would Jesus be able to forgive Judas, the one who did him in? If Christ could not forgive Judas, would we follow Christ?

The Second Coming of Christ in Scripture was described by Jesus as a wedding feast with Jesus as the bridegroom. Would Judas be welcome?

Here is a poem by William Buchanan writing about Christ and Judas Iscariot.

Tw'as the soul of Judas Iscariot,

Strange sad and tall,

Stood all alone at the dead of night

Before a mighty hall.

Tw'as the bridegroom stood at the open door

And beckoned smiling sweet

Tw'as the soul of Judas Iscariot

Stole in and fell at his feet.

The holy supper is spread within

And the many candles shine

And I have waited long for thee

Before I poured the wine.

The supper wine is poured at last

The lights burn bright and fair.

Iscariot washed the bridegroom's feet

And dried them with his hair.

It is because Jesus forgives even Iscariot, that there is room for you and me. If Iscariot cannot be forgiven, if Adolf Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin, or the worst murderer on death row, or that one person, perhaps your father you hold a grudge against, cannot be forgiven?, then we need to let go of our Christianity and as far as I can see there is no hope for any of us.

For if forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation cannot handle the hard cases, they are no good at all.

Amazingly in our day and generation in South Africa, the truth and reconciliation commission actually took the words of Christ seriously and for the first time in history, forgiveness was politicized as a model for the rest of the world. And it succeeded!

At the cemetery on the River Kwai, the last resting place of over 7,000 British, Dutch and Australian POWS there is a large Christian Cross. Why is it there?

It reminds us that the One who hung from a cross, forgave from the cross. The Christian symbol of the cross is a symbol of forgiveness. It is a symbol of the greatest unrealized dream of them all. That we can love one another as a better alternative than war or death or unkindness. The cross says it all without saying a word...

Forgive! Forgive your wife, your husband, your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, your fellow elder, your teenage son, your minister, your daughter, your ex, your fellow church member, your employee, anyone you do not understand, anyone who is of a different sexual orientation, anyone of a different nationality, race or faith, or anyone that you believe to be a trouble maker for you, yes even your enemy.

For it was Jesus who stood so tall in human history when he said "Love your enemies, do good to those who despitefully use you." Can we even hear him today?

We also need to forgive ourselves...

One of Christ's strongest parables that forgiveness is a two way street ends with these solemn words: "Were you not bound to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you? And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debts. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart."

Let me conclude.

I had a man who was an elder in Knox Stratford. Several years after I had left I got a phone call. "David I did not treat you right when you were here. I want to ask your forgiveness. Will you forgive me?"

I paused for a moment and said “Of course!” How could I not after talking about Christ’s way for so many years? But it was hard. But then I found that it is easier to let it go, than to treasure the wound. Personally, I have tried both. What I have learned is this. ***Forgiveness is as much for us as it is for the other person!***

The scene was a funeral parlor. It had been a young death of a vibrant man. Several relatives had given tribute. Then the minister asked for anyone who would like to speak. Bonnie Furman rose to speak and introduced herself with the following words: I am Bonnie, the deceased’s ex. There was a stir as every head in the place turned to see her standing in the back of the room. She could feel the concerns over what she might say. They had all heard stories of bitter and angry spouses spewing vitriol in such situations...

The minister had told stories of the earlier years and had given only 10 seconds to the 16 years she had spent with him. With a tear- stained face and choking sobs she spoke briefly of the love and affection of their shared history. The multiples of staring eyes began to soften as they listened to her gentle forgiving words. Smiles began to form at the end of parched lips. She could feel the warmth and acceptance pouring out to her as her gracious words created a spell of love.

After the service many of her ex’s longtime friends and family came to her to extend hugs and kind words about the memories she shared. She proved on that day that love doesn’t have to die and that forgiveness is the way. The person who cannot forgive, tragically breaks the very bridge over which they too must pass.

But once over the bridge - we find that the bridge leads somewhere! It is a bridge of renewed friendships; it’s a bridge to great relationships with mom and dad, to life itself and to the future of our children’s children on this planet! What seems at first to be very hard is actually the way home...

Amen.