

Beyond the Blame Game ~ Forgiving ‘Them’

Lenten Sermon Series on Forgiveness III

Luke 6:37-42

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Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

“Do not judge and you will not be judged... Forgive and you will be forgiven...How can you say to your friend: Friend, let me take the speck out of your eye, when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?” Luke 6:37, 42

In the Globe and Mail one morning, I read a story about “A Poster Couple in Applied Christianity” under the headline “Forgiveness in Kenya” . Perhaps you heard about John and Eloise Bergen, the missionary couple from B.C., in Kenya working with street children? They were beaten with machetes, raped and robbed in their home. But they have since returned to Kenya, to the trial of their attackers - to forgive them. Remarkable, eh?

Such heroic stories of Christian forgiveness, -like Jesus dying words on the cross: “Forgive them for they know not what they do” - are easier for most of us mortals to admire than to emulate. We want spiritual help with more commonplace everyday forgiveness. But John Bergen and Eloise Bergen give us these clues about the ‘how to’ of forgiving. It take spiritual practise. “We learned how to forgive much earlier”, John explained, listing the real wounds he felt had knocked him down earlier in life, “the common stuff everyone gets from people you counted on to respect you.” Eloise admitted that “forgiving people you love and care for is harder than forgiving strangers who rape you.”

So true. Aren’t our familiar grudges and family resentments the most weighty and persistent ‘unforgivenesses’ we carry around? Have we all forgiven our parents yet, for their imperfect parenting? Re-understood mom’s drinking or dad’s absence in light of their family history or life circumstances? Have we forgiven our ex-spouse of the decades ago divorce? Our boss for being a bully? Our hero for disappointing

us? Maybe not yet?

Forgiveness is a process that takes time. We can only approach each instance where forgiveness is wanting as we grow spiritually strong enough. Our forgiveness muscles grow stronger as they are fed by God's love and we exercise our growing capacity for compassion - for seeing our self and others with judgement-free clarity.

Self awareness - seeing our self clearly but without judgement , becoming aware of the mote in our eye - is vital to the humility from which forgiveness can flow. Jesus' parable about this guy with the speck in his eye presages modern psychological knowledge that people tend to 'project' onto others, what we have not 'seen' of our self. The person I just can't stand usually amplifies and mirrors a characteristic of me I'd rather not see. (Likewise the person I idolize or fall in love with may mirror hidden qualities I have not yet claimed.)

To mature in life and love, we gradually learn to forgive our self for having a moat in our eye, and we tenderly remove it. Then we are able to see our shadow self and our shining self... owning the mix of strength and weakness we all are. Knowing our own weakness gives us more tolerance for other's weaknesses. With some compassion and imagination we can see others more realistically - recognizing our speck and their moat in more forgivable proportion.

Admittedly, throwing the angry stone that indicts 'them' is easier than forgiving, which requires us to take responsibility for our own feelings or altering our circumstances. Holding onto your ex with the tense ties of negative emotions, is easier than renegotiating your relationship as co-parents...for a while. But just imagine what your kids will have to forgive you for, if you don't grow up about this! Claiming the role of victim in any relationship is easier - at first - than openly confronting your trespasser and revealing your own pain. It is hard to admit how we hurt and express our anger. But there can be no real forgiveness without honest emotional reckoning and emotional releasing. And oh, how hard it can be to look

our offender in the eye and hear them out, because then we may see our contribution to the conflict. These are among the steps to true forgiveness. The kind that heals hearts and resurrects relationships.

Forgiveness is hard psychological work. No wonder we often react to the real and imagined barbs of life with knee jerk blame. My son gave me a fridge magnet that makes me laugh. It says “I didn’t say it was your fault. I said I was going to blame you.” Sharon Moon prefaces one of her meditations for forgiving with this observation: “For a lot of us, blaming is an overused tool in our emotional repertoire...There are payoffs to the blame game. You get to feel superior. You get to direct the focus of attention away from yourself and your own insecurities.” I don’t mean to trivialize the big hurts or abuses you may have suffered at someone’s hands - or society’s - but regardless of the seriousness of our wound, blaming, like we said about guilt last week, “is just sitting in a puddle, splashing.”

So how do we stop splashing and get out of the puddle of unforgiveness? Unbiased listeners help. Counselling helps. Support groups help. Meditation and prayer really help, because God helps!

I use this meditation for forgiveness. After I’ve done lots of thinking and talking about my feelings about a difficult relationship, I get tired of wasting all the brain space that my hurt and anger is claiming, so I finally persuade myself to meditate . I picture the person I have a problem with in my mind’s eye. I place them at a safe distance from me and surround them with an aura of white light. I try to see them smiling. I try to smile at them. Maybe I can. Maybe I just can’t. In the beginning, I’ve learned to expect I’ll banish that face pretty fast. I ask for help to see this person, and myself, more clearly. I’ve been surprised to find myself bringing ‘them’ in closer. Even sharing a knowing smile. And once that reconciliation happens in meditation, it usually takes place for real.

In ‘Broken Open’ Elizabeth Lesser suggests prayer is a marvelous way out of the

blame game. When we pray, “we can bring our painful feelings into the open and say... ‘I have been wronged.’ And then we can ask for a vaster view - one that contains within it all the forgiveness we need in order to move forward.” Just when you think you won’t ever be able to let go of your offender’s throat, the wind of the Spirit suddenly flows through, loosening the gripping of bad feelings.

Forgiveness often involves some delicate eye surgery - I surgery - removing moats and specks until we can see our self and ‘them’ with 20-20 compassion. As we are truly ready, we can sign the informed consent of spiritual commitment to forgiveness. Self aware and committed to prayer, we discover how God’s steady hand will perform the healing cure. When we really see ‘them’, the blame game is finally over and we feel free.