

## “The Power of Forgiveness”

April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

Rev. Ann Eichhorn



*Forgiveness*  
Sofiya Inger

### Readings

Johan Christoph Arnold

in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter*

(reflections from the world's best-loved spiritual writers)

Easter is far more than a holiday or celebration; it is power. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and to bless those who persecute us. These are not just words. As his compassionate plea from the cross shows: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), he practiced what he preached.

David Whyte

from *Consolations*, pages 68, 69

Forgiveness is a skill, a way of preserving clarity, sanity, and generosity in an individual life, a beautiful way of shaping the mind to a future we want for ourselves .... To forgive is to put oneself in a larger gravitational field of experience than the one that first seemed to hurt us. We reimagine ourselves in the light of our maturity and we reimagine the past in the light of our new identity, we allow ourselves to be gifted by a story larger than the story that first hurt us and left us bereft.

---

I need to begin the message this morning, entitled “The Power of Forgiveness,” with a disclaimer that I do not see myself as any kind of expert or saint, for I am continually trying to understand the notions of forgiveness that Jesus taught to his followers, especially as his teachings relate to things going on in today's world.

As Christians, we again enter Holy Week remembering the life of Jesus, his ministry, and his horrid death, leading to the beginnings of our faith. Most of us are familiar with the text from Luke 23:34 which recounts the last words of Jesus from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Dr. Martin Luther King said in his book *Love in Action* that there are probably no words in all the New Testament that express more clearly and solemnly the magnanimity of Jesus' spirit than that sublime utterance from the cross. “Here we see love at its best. It is a marvelous expression of Jesus' ability to match words with actions.” As Jesus looked out at those who had inflicted suffering upon him, he did not express anger and hate in his last words before he died; rather, he expressed compassion and love. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had talked passionately about forgiveness. His disciples struggled to

understand what forgiveness meant, as is evident in Peter's question: "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Seven times?" Jesus answered him saying, "I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is not a matter of quantity, but a matter of quality. King goes on, "One cannot forgive 490 times without it becoming a part of the habit structure of one's being. *Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.*"

Jesus admonished his followers to love their enemies and pray for those that harmed them. This lesson fell on the ears of many of his followers as somewhat of a strange commandment. Their ears were not attuned to hearing of such amazing love. They had been conditioned to seek redress in the time-honored practices of retaliation, and yet *Jesus taught them that love and forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity.*

In this season of Lent, we are invited to reflect on the word *forgiveness* and how it is a deep expression of love. The dictionary definition of what it is to forgive is *to stop feeling angry or resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw, or mistake; to cancel a debt or excuse one's ignorance.* When we are first hurt, wounded, or betrayed, even thinking about forgiveness seems impossible, and we may find ourselves enmeshed in the pain. I have learned that healing from pain inflicted by another can take some time. Theologian Henri Nouwen tells us that

[h]ealing begins not when the pain is taken away, but when it can be shared and seen as part of a bigger pain. It's when the pain is taken out of isolation that we become able to mourn what has happened to us and then free ourselves from the grip of the hurtful event. ... [A]s we remain victims of anger and resentment we are in the power of darkness; when we forgive those who threaten or harm our lives, they lose power over us. We can then take the first steps into a new dance of freedom. It is freeing to become aware that we do not have to be victims of our past and can learn new ways of responding.

I learned about this healing process and the time and effort it can take during the five years I worked with the abused women's program here in Marin. During that time, I regularly heard stories of extreme physical, emotional, mental, sexual, and financial abuse of women, and often also of their children. I saw the results of women living for long periods of time with constant fear, pain, and death threats, and being held captive in their own homes. I saw their difficult struggles to regain health, courage, and strength to find a way forward. The figure that remains in my memory is that it often takes abused women up to seven attempts to finally get themselves out of that kind of struggle and misery. Integral to the support offered by the program was to help the women begin *to envision themselves as survivors and no longer as victims.* To move beyond the victim role is central to imagining a new beginning as a survivor. Taking this step can begin the process of becoming free of the painful past or present and forming a new self-image as a survivor. Forgiveness was sometimes part of that process, but forgiving doesn't have to mean that we forget the painful experiences we have undergone.

Author Mark Nepo describes forgiveness this way:

Forgiveness has deeper rewards than excusing someone for how they have hurt us. *The deeper healing comes in the exchange of our resentments for inner freedom.* At last, the wound, *even if never acknowledged by the other person,* can heal, and our life can continue.

In an expanded version of today's quote from Johann Christoph Arnold we read:

Easter is far more than a holiday or celebration; it is power. ... It is a door to inner peace and happiness. Forgiveness is not ignoring the wrongdoing, but overcoming [the anger and hate] inside us and finding love in our world. When we forgive, we set ourselves free from the demon of bitterness. But we also set loose the power of love in the world. ... If the cross and resurrection are not just historic happenings but present realities, which I believe they are, then what we celebrate at Easter is the healing power of God's forgiveness at work in our world today. God's forgiveness can transform lives on a personal level, but it can influence events on a broader scale as well.

One of the things we talked about in Stone Soup this week was what Mary Oliver said in one of her poems about navigating away from something unpleasant.

Forgiveness is a way of navigating away from waves and tumult of hurt, and allows us to more calmly and gently seek smoother healing waters while paddling towards new shores. Forgiveness gives us the in between time to repair, recover, and reimagine ourselves.

When we repeat every Sunday the Lord's Prayer, we are experiencing another call for forgiveness in the phrase "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (or "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"). We ask God to forgive us in the manner in which we forgive others. Doesn't that petition imply forgiveness going in several directions – to God from us for our discretions, from us to others for theirs, and from us to ourselves? Can we learn how to forgive ourselves? Martin Luther King offered these words:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

Love is the only force capable of transforming and healing, and with its rippling effect it could change the world. We must learn how to forgive ourselves, how be compassionate to ourselves, to love ourselves. Doing this can be the beginning of learning how to forgive others.

I will close this message by repeating the quote from David Whyte's book *Consolations*:

Forgiveness is a skill, a way of preserving clarity, sanity, and generosity in an individual life, a beautiful way of shaping the mind to a future we want for ourselves .... To forgive is to put oneself in a larger gravitational field of experience than the one that first seemed to hurt us. We reimagine ourselves in the light of our maturity and we reimagine the past in the light of our new identity, we allow ourselves to be gifted by a story larger than the story that first hurt us and left us bereft.

We know love because we are loved.

This Holy Week, might we each take some time to meditate on the act of forgiveness, to explore for ourselves whether there are ways our love, empathy and compassion might move us toward new possibilities or even peace of mind. Can we believe in the power of love and find ways to engage it, trusting that love begets love? I pray we might find some new small beginnings that just might help bring about changes in our world. Amen.