

“A Course in Forgiveness”

Rev. David Gregory

September 16, 2018

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost



Detail from *The Return of the Prodigal Son*
Rembrandt

First reading

David Whyte in Consolations

To forgive is to assume a larger identity than the person who was first hurt, to mature and bring to fruition an identity that can put its arm, not only around the afflicted one within but also around the memories seared within us by the original blow and through a kind of psychological virtuosity, extend our understanding to one who first delivered it.

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; an admittance that if forgiveness comes through understanding, and if understanding is just a matter of time and application then we might as well begin forgiving right at the beginning of any drama rather than put ourselves through the full cycle of festering, incapacitation, reluctant healing and eventual blessing.

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.

Scripture reading

Colossians 3:12-15

from The Message by Eugene Peterson

Dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness.

Thank you for matriculating in the School of Love, one from which we never graduate. Does that depress you? I hope not. In this school, graduation doesn't matter. Letters after your name have no meaning. This is not an education of the mind, nor is it the learning of a system. This is the practice of spirit, always unfolding and evolving, never fully arriving. Love has far more to do with the process than with the outcome. Love is the reason we are here today. We're not here to placate an angry God. We're not here to sell our particular brand of Reformed Christianity. We're not even here to perpetuate what we have created in the form of Community Congregational Church. We're just here to help each other learn to love our way through this world, and find a path of wholeness and healing for ourselves and for the earth.

We arrive here with empty places in our souls: the unexplainable deficits, the missing pieces of humanness that keep us searching for something more. We might point to our parents, our lineage, or even our genetics in an attempt to understand these deficits, but an understanding of what did or didn't happen will never be enough to fill them up. We are used to saying that "God is love," but I would rather say that "love is God." Love is an energy that we may not be able to fully explain, but we can see it when it happens, we can feel when it touches us, and we can certainly sense when it is there. "God" for whatever reason can seem beyond the grasp of our senses, but love is the "very present help in trouble." If you're looking for God, then look for love. When you experience love, you experience God. Let's not make it more complicated than that, OK? So, welcome to the first course in the school of love. I thought we might start with the hardest one of all. I thought if we could pass this course, the others might feel so much more downstream.

For a couple of millennia we have echoed the words of Jesus, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," or the Apostle Paul who said, "Be tender-hearted, forgiving each other as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven you." But why is this so hard to do? Why do I seethe with resentment at the sight of certain politicians? Why am I unable to let go of the slights and insults that happened to me in grade school? How can I still be angry at my father over something when he's been dead for nearly eighteen years? We've tried the prescriptions to forgive and forget. "Just let it go," we are told. "You're not helping yourself by carrying this around," to which we're inclined to respond, "I know I'm supposed to forgive, but you don't understand. This is different." It might indeed be different, but it's still a roadblock and we cannot get around it. This is why we've come to school — first of all to learn the lesson, and then to practice it over and over, time after time, year after year, until it becomes a little easier, and then a little easier, then easier still. It may feel like we're going in circles, when we're really spiraling upward.

Recently, I discovered a lovely book entitled, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, by the English poet, David Whyte. It's written in prose, but the prose is itself poetic. The chapter on forgiveness caught my eye as I was preparing to talk to you this week. David Whyte says, "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."

At the risk of sounding heretical, I have been struck this week with the idea that true forgiveness is really self-serving, and that this is OK after all. We're used to thinking of forgiveness as that thing that we are holding over someone's head in order to influence their behavior. "If I forgive them, perhaps they will have a change of heart." Or perhaps it's a little less noble than that: "If I forgive them, they'll just walk all over me." I think what Whyte is saying is that forgiveness might not change anyone but the person who forgives. If I could somehow send a letter to the White House that says, "Dear Mr. President, I forgive you," I don't think it would change anyone but me.

Twelve years ago, when Charles Roberts walked into a one-room school and shot ten Amish girls, killing half of them, and then shot himself, the world got a glimpse of true forgiveness, when those Amish families and their friends raised funds to donate to the man's widow and children. This act of forgiveness certainly did not impact the shooter. I imagine it may have impacted his family, but I'm certain that its greatest impact was on the families of the victims, for it enabled them to move to another level of this upward spiral. Years later we still ask the questions, "How could they do that? Where does that kind of forgiveness come from?"

It comes from practice. How does a virtuoso pianist create the music that amazes us? Practice. How does the elite athlete accomplish such amazing feats? Practice. How do we sharpen our skills of love and forgiveness? Practice. The church, you see, is the perfect laboratory in which to do this. We're here because we choose to be. No one forces us to be here. We are in a purely optional relationship. Sometimes church is heaven on earth. Other times it can be hell on wheels. We experience profound love and care in this place, and sometimes our feelings are deeply hurt. There are moments in time when we're happy with how things are going, and other times our noses are out of joint, because someone just won't listen to us or to our point of view. In the hostile environment of our current cultural situation, forgiveness is a skill that must be learned, practiced consciously, and then ultimately chosen as a way of being. And this church is where we learn how to do these things.

It wasn't easy in the first century, nor is it in the twenty-first. Let's face it, forgiveness may at times have little effect on its object, but it often transforms the one who is doing the forgiving. Forget what you've heard about turning the other cheek. Let's learn how to really do this, and in the process find our clarity, sanity and generosity. Let's enjoy this practice field, and let forgiveness be our way of life. It won't always be fun, but it will always be good.

Amen.

