

Practicing Forgiveness
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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow
Pentecost 3 C (Proper 6)

This may come as a bit of surprise to many of you this morning, but I was not always a nice guy. When I was in sixth grade there was one girl name Holly, that we teased pretty mercilessly. I say we, because it wasn't me alone, but still me as part of a group of guys. And looking back, I don't know why we were so hard on her. She hadn't done anything to any of us that I can recall. She wasn't mean to any of us, she wasn't the smartest, or the dumbest, or the prettiest, or the ugliest or the best or worst athlete in the class. She really did nothing to deserve our teasing which is perhaps what made our actions toward her so difficult for her to understand. Holly and I went to different middle schools, and the high school we both attended was over 3000 students, so it really isn't a surprise that we didn't run into each other again until the last semester of our senior year of high school. We were both in a creative writing class together, and a few weeks into the class we started talking. I was immediately embarrassed at how we'd treated her, certain that she'd remember all the terrible things we'd said and done. At first she dismissed it. "That was a long time ago, and we are both different people now." Boy was I relieved. She wasn't still mad. I am sorry though, I remember saying. "You guys hurt me a lot back then, and I actually had really low self esteem for a long time afterward. I even went to counseling about it" I remember her saying. "But I've forgiven you all since then. I'm glad we get a chance to get to know one another again in this class." And that was it. We never spoke of our elementary school days again.

Forgiveness is a tricky, sticky, complicated subject. It calls into question our beliefs about God, about ourselves, about others. It raises questions about mercy and judgment, justice and compassion, the past and how it impacts the present and the future. Perhaps because forgiveness is such difficult subject, most of us would rather not spend too much time talking or thinking about it. But forgiveness just won't go away. Talking about, and practicing forgiveness might be one of the most important things we do together.

Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we talk about forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" or in some other churches "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" or even "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." No matter how you say it, the point is the same. God forgives and we should forgive too. Perhaps the reason we say it so often is because we so often need to be reminded.

How many of you have ever asked for another person to forgive you? I want an actual show of hands here, this is not a rhetorical question. I've said I'm sorry plenty of times, but I'm not sure I've ever said the words "please forgive me." Those are powerful words aren't they? How many of you have ever been asked by someone for forgiveness. Again, an actual show of hands please. I ask these questions, not because I'm

interested in embarrassing people or calling them out in public, but because it is my perception, my prejudgment that most of us know almost nothing about forgiveness. We know about giving and receiving apologies, but little about forgiveness. They are related but not the same thing.

To me, apologizing is about acknowledging we've made a mistake and asking another person to acknowledge it, but also to kind of ignore it. Lucy and Campbell, our two daughters, are what seems like constantly apologizing to one another. Sorry I took your toy, sorry I hit you, sorry I was mean, whatever it may be. Either spontaneously or by parental coercion, they seem to come to a place where they can understand what they did is wrong, but little is expected in moving forward. Their relationship is not changed. Apologizing is a concept even kids can understand, but forgiveness is far more complicated.

To me, apologies seem primarily about the past, whereas forgiveness is about the future. Apologies are about acknowledging mistakes, but forgiveness is about changing relationships. Power is at play with regards to forgiveness in way that it isn't when we are apologizing. In seeking forgiveness we are saying to another that they have the power to determine how the relationship will move forward, or won't move forward. In offering forgiveness, we seize the power to determine, at least on our end of the relationship, how or if the relationship will have any future. If apologies look backward, then forgiveness looks forward.

Long before I ever realized that what I along with my friends had done to Holly was wrong, she had decided that the future, her future, was more important. She was no longer willing to allow what happened in the past to continue to control her future. While we may not have control over whether or not some acknowledges, or names, or verbalizes what they've done as wrong, we have the power to make a change, and to lay claim to different future.

I recently went to a workshop led by Dorothy Bass, who wrote a book several years ago called "Practicing Our Faith." In it she names practices that we as Christians should make part of our lives—things like healing, discernment, singing, keeping Sabbath, hospitality, and yes, forgiveness. Forgiveness is a practice—it is something that we must not only work at, but more importantly, make part of our regular lives. Forgiveness is not something that we do, from time to time, but rather a way of living in the world day after day—to live as forgiven and forgiving people.

The woman in today's scripture knows what it means to have been forgiven. Her abundant, opulent, (even garish) praising of Jesus is a result of—not the reason for—the result of her having had many sins and having been forgiven. One of the truths we lay claim to as Christians is that nothing we do, nothing we do, can make God stop loving us. Jesus teaches a lot about forgiveness, not a lot about apologizing from what I've read, but a lot about forgiveness, because our God, the God we worship, the God we've come to know and the God we are in relationship with, is a God who cares, yes about what we've done, but more to the point, cares about what we have still to do together. Our God is not a God who keeps score—no matter how many jokes we hear about the book Saint Peter holds at the pearly gates of heaven, but a God who is about relationship, about

covenant, about the future. In my mind, apologies are easy. Forgiveness is hard. But it is a demand of the Gospel. As followers of Christ we are asked to forgive—to forgive one another and perhaps even more difficult to forgive ourselves.

We may not be the best father, the best mother, the best sister, the best brother, the best friend, or spouse or co-worker. It's ok—God still loves us, in spite of our shortcomings. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting, it doesn't mean giving up, it doesn't mean ignoring the demands of justice, but if we are going to get where God is leading us, we've got to continue to strive to become a people who receive forgiveness—God's and the forgiveness of others, and we've got to practice forgiveness because God is calling us, each and every one of us, into a future we can only imagine, and if we are constantly looking backward, we are going to miss it. While I don't remember feeling relieved that day back when Holly forgave me, I do remember how much we enjoyed the rest of that class together. May God grant us not only forgiveness, but the strength and courage and vision to forgive and be forgiven by others.