

As We Forgive
William R. Miller

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2007

Shoved into Jesus' presence, she stood there covered with shame, waiting to die. Pulled from her house in the very act of adultery, she knew what to expect as a crowd gathered around her. "The law of Moses requires that she be stoned to death," someone said. "What do *you* say, teacher?" With the faintest of hope, she looked over at Jesus, for she had heard about this rabbi, but her heart sank when he just continued writing on the ground with a stick, lost in thought.

You know the rest of the story. He said simply, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone." I love John's description of this scene – that one by one they turned away, *the eldest ones first*, until finally the only man who *was* without sin remained. "Where are all those who condemned you?" he asked. They were gone.

There are many themes and teachings shared across the world's great religions. There is one theme, though, that while not unique to Christianity certainly takes on a new meaning, centrality, and vitality within the Christian faith. It was among the most revolutionary of Jesus' teachings, and is a keystone in our understanding of Jesus as the Christ. It is the theme of forgiveness.

There are at least two ways in which forgiveness is crucial to our faith. The first is in understanding the meaning of the Christ event: that in the death of Jesus, something happened – be it mystical, sacrificial, symbolic – but something happened that frees us from our shortcomings of the past and gives us back our lives anew. We are reminded of this every week in our confession and assurance of pardon: Today is a new day, a fresh beginning, a new creation.

The second aspect of forgiveness is that we are required to forgive others: not just our friends (for everyone does that) but also enemies; not just when forgiveness is deserved, but regardless of merit; not just once or twice, but beyond keeping count; to release resentment and judgment not just for the past, but also for the present. This is a most demanding requirement, a standard of perfect forgiveness toward which we can choose to move, but that we cannot expect to attain fully as long as we shall live. The only perfect forgiveness is that which comes to us from God.

What *is* this perfect forgiveness, this manifestation of love that comes from God and that we are enjoined to give to each other? To begin with, I want to say that there are five things that forgiveness is *not*.

First of all, forgiveness is not *amnesia*. Forgiving and forgetting may be akin, but they are two different acts. Forgiveness does not require forgetting, nor *can* one forgive that which has been forgotten. Forgiveness is a gift given with full memory of what has happened. Because God's knowledge and memory of us are fullest, so must God's forgiveness of us be most complete. If anything, it is forgiveness that permits us finally to lay to rest the bitter memories that we too often nurture for so long.

Secondly, forgiveness is not *acquittal*. Acquittal is finding a person to be guiltless, blameless, without responsibility for what happened. The acquitted person did not commit the act, or is not at fault. True forgiveness may bring a freedom that is *like* acquittal, perhaps even better than a legal acquittal, after which doubts sometimes linger. It is a gift given with full knowledge that the person did it, is responsible. It is the very fact of the person's responsibility that requires forgiveness. This also means that one need not deny responsibility in order to be forgiven.

Third, forgiveness is not an *achievement*. It is not an award given only to those most deserving. It is not earned, nor can it be. It is an unearned gift, freely given, without regard to merit.

Fourth, forgiveness is not *approval*. To forgive another's action is not to condone the act, or to approve of it. It does not require the forgiving person to say, "I think that what you did was really OK," or even, "I might have done the same thing in your situation" (although that is true more often than we might like to admit, and the angrier we are, the more true it is likely to be). Forgiveness is not needed from those who approve. It is a gift that is needed and given precisely when we do not approve.

Finally, forgiveness is not *acquiescence*. It is not a license that reads, "Do whatever you like in the future, and it will be OK." Jesus said to the woman who escaped stoning, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." It is not a suspension of values, an absence of rules or guidelines. It is not permission to stay the same. To the contrary, forgiveness inspires and enables change. Forgiveness is not acquiescence. It is a gift given with the knowledge that the future may or may not be different, but with a profound and active hope that it will.

Forgiveness, then, is none of these things. It is not amnesia or acquittal, not achieved, not approval or acquiescence. Rather it is a *knowing acceptance of the person*. Does this sound contradictory? It is not, because acceptance of a person is not the same as approval of the person's actions. Neither is accepting a person in the present inconsistent with a hope for change in that person in the future. Acceptance requires nothing of the other: no denial of responsibility, no proofs or promises. It is given without expectation of return. Forgiveness is an acceptance that *inspires* change rather than waiting for it to happen.

Forgiveness is difficult. God knows how God does it: day in and day out, year after year, century after century! We cannot comprehend the love that is required to fully forgive even that which happens in our own single lifetime, let alone the magnitude of patience and hope and compassion that lie behind God's forgiveness. We can pronounce such grace "amazing," but the true conundrums of forgiveness are realized best when we confront our own need to forgive and be forgiven. Forgiveness is one of the deepest and most difficult disciplines of the spirit.

This is why it disturbed me to pray week after week: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." How many thousands of times have we said these words? Just what do these familiar words mean?

For the first half of my life, I understood them in a particular way. Perhaps this is also how you have understood them. "Forgive us . . . as we forgive others," I thought, meant that we were asking to be forgiven in direct proportion to our own forgiveness of other people. The "as" here would mean "because" or "in proportion to." Nowhere is there a clearer statement of salvation by works than in this: to the extent that I forgive, I will be forgiven. Truly to ask for that is to invoke upon ourselves a terrible curse, a stiff sentence in which we condemn ourselves to be held responsible at the end of time. For if our sins are to be forgiven only in proportion to how forgiving we've been throughout our lives, we're in deep and serious trouble! Even if it meant, "as we forgave at the peak of our spiritual maturity," still I would tremble. *Thousands* of times we have asked God to do this to us! When the impact of that proposed deal with God finally hit me, I began to mumble whenever I reached those fateful words in the Lord's prayer: *as we forgive*.

Is there another way to understand this? What is the meaning of "as we forgive"? Languages are rich, with meanings within meanings. Might the "as" be interpreted as "while"? – forgive us our sins

while we forgive others, while we work toward learning how to forgive as God forgives? Here we switch from works to grace. We are no longer earning our forgiveness from God. There is no proposed trade, no contractual deal made with God. No longer are we paying eternally for the percentage of sins that we have left unforgiven. Thank God! The freedom that comes of that grace may, in fact, release and inspire us to be more forgiving of other people. *Because* we have been forgiven, we can forgive. This is precisely the opposite of the first meaning. Works or grace? The argument has raged for centuries, and here it seems to pivot on that tiny word “as.”

Even in the gospels there seems to be disagreement on this. The Lord’s prayer appears in only two places: in Matthew 6 and in Luke 11. The words of this familiar prayer are not the same in these two accounts. Familiar to most is the King James translation of Matthew’s report of the prayer. It is Matthew who so strongly emphasizes the proportionate interpretation – as many sins as I forgive, so will that proportion of my own sins be forgiven. Although most authorities believe that the author of this gospel is not the same Matthew who was Jesus’ disciple, the thinking here could easily be that of an accountant or tax collector. The memory of Luke, the healer, is somewhat different. Luke’s elaboration on forgiveness bespeaks a more compassionate understanding of human nature:

You must be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful. Don’t judge other people and you will not be judged yourselves. Don’t condemn and you will not be condemned. Make allowances for others and people will make allowances for you. Give and people will give to you – yes, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will they pour into your lap. For whatever measure you use with other people, they will use in their dealings with you.” (Luke 6:37-39, J.B. Phillips paraphrase)

This causes me to wonder if there may be yet another way to understand these enduring words: as we forgive. Perhaps it is not meant to be either the terrible deal with God, or the grace with no strings attached. Perhaps instead it is descriptive, a statement about how we are made as human beings: that it is *when* we forgive others that we are also most able to experience forgiveness ourselves. For this I believe, that there is a direct relationship between the experience of acceptance ourselves and our ability to accept others unconditionally. As we forgive, we become forgiven. I believe it’s a spiral, working both ways. If you are harsh and critical and unforgiving of others, it is likely that at some level you yourself have a haunting sense of being unacceptable. Similarly if you are harsh and critical and unforgiving of yourself, you diminish the peace and strength that would allow you to be loving of others. Paul Tillich wrote of: “That mixture of selfishness and self-hate that permanently pursues us, that prevents us from loving others, that prohibits us from losing ourselves in the love with which we are loved eternally. He who is able to love himself is able to love others also; he who has learned to overcome self-contempt has overcome his contempt for others.”

I believe that this is how we are made as people, that “*as we forgive*” is something like a wiring diagram of the human spirit. Within this third understanding are elements of the other two, of salvation by works, and of grace. It seems to be true that to the extent that we daily fail to forgive others, we remain tormented ourselves; not solely in the future, but *now*. The Kingdom is coming *and now is*. To be unforgiving now is to be haunted by a sense of being unforgiven, unaccepted. To be forgiving and accepting of others is to inherit a sense of peacefulness, of *being* accepted. Here, then, is that proportionate trade-off. It’s just part of how we are made.

Finally, there is what Tillich called “the courage to accept acceptance.” The circle of forgiveness is incomplete until it has been accepted. It is not easy to forgive. It is also not easy to accept forgiveness. It means first of all having to confront that for which we need forgiveness, to know that what we did was not OK, to accept responsibility for having done it, to know that we have not earned

forgiveness, and to resolve to do better. That can evoke in us all manner of responses that block our acceptance of grace. We may turn the act over and over again in our minds, as if seeing it again would somehow absolve us. We struggle to explain why we did it, perhaps to rationalize or justify it, or maybe connecting it with other shortcomings of our past to form a pattern for which we can berate ourselves. There is even a reluctance to enter into the contract of forgiveness. There is a temptation, whether with people or with God, to ask, “Are you sure? Do you *really* forgive me? Don’t you want me to suffer a little longer?”, bespeaking an underlying sense of “I don’t deserve it” or “I don’t forgive myself.” The truth most always, of course, is that we *don’t* deserve it, that forgiveness is a chosen gift and not time off for good behavior. Thank God we don’t get what we deserve!

The time comes to stop all of this maneuvering, and simply to accept acceptance. This is itself an act of faith and of courage. It is here that grace breaks through, releasing us from the inertia of the past, giving us the freedom to become new. The moment of forgiveness is one in which we are freed to see our whole selves – both light and shadow. It frees us to confess the darkness that is in us, that we know full well to be there, and to look upon it without fear, in the knowledge that it is only a part of us, and that as whole children of God we are forgiven and accepted. Grace is not only the offering, but also the accepting of the free gift of God’s eternal love and acceptance. It is the ultimate and surest source of freedom from self-contempt. To be able to overcome self-contempt is to be freed to love and forgive others. God’s grace frees us to forgive, and in so doing to experience our own forgiveness.