

As We Forgive Others

Sermon by Roger T. Williams (3/6/22)

Good morning...I'm Roger Williams, a member of this amazing Madison Christian Community joint venture. I appreciate being asked to provide a sermon during this interim period when we are without a minister! Thanks so much to the Steering Committee, Worship Team and everyone else who has filled in with sermons, liturgy, children's messages, music and tech support during this transition time. It's been an inspiring time to see MCC talents emerge!

I want to focus my comments this morning on "forgiveness..." not because I am an expert on the topic or because I'm incredibly good at it but because I want to get better at it and I suspect we all need to get better at it. And one way to get better is to reflect on past experiences and think about how to do it differently in the future.

Lent is a period of self-reflection, so a good time, it seems, to talk about forgiveness. The Bible is filled with passages about forgiveness in the Old and New Testaments:

From Proverbs 25: "When your foes are hungry, feed them; when they are thirsty, give them water to drink."

From Matthew 5: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This will show that you are children of God."

From Luke 6: "Do not judge others and God will not Judge you; do not condemn others and God will not condemn you; forgive others and God will forgive you."

From Ephesians 4: "Be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ."

And of course, there is the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us."

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? Forgive others and God will forgive you. But I suspect all of us have experienced challenges in forgiving others and being forgiven by others. Some of the hurts we experience are minor, but some are almost "unforgivable:" child abuse or neglect, spousal abuse or battery, incest, abandonment, infidelity, theft or destruction of personal property. These are some of the things UW-Madison Social Work professor Beverly Flanigan addressed in her book Forgiving the Unforgivable.

There are other seemingly unforgivable acts in today's world: the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin and the Russian armed forces; the killing of unarmed Black persons by racist Whites; the refusal of some persons to accept the Covid-19 vaccine so we can achieve "herd immunity" under the guise of "personal freedom." All of these are life and death situations. Can we...should we forgive these seemingly unforgivable acts? I'll let you decide for yourself!

Now, let me share a personal story with you.

One night, when I tucked my then seven-year-old son in bed, I said my usual “good night” and told him I loved him. He looked up at me and said, “Dad, why do you keep telling me you love me? You’ve probably told me that a zillion times!” His comment brought me up short, and I could not respond for several seconds. Then, my response came from deep inside of me. “Landon, I guess it’s because when I was a kid, I never heard my dad say he loved me. I want you to know that I love you. I don’t want you to ever have to wonder about that. And I want you to know that I will love you always, no matter what happens.” Landon looked up at me and said, “Thanks, Dad—I love you too!”

This event brought me face-to-face with the fact that my fathering style represents a 180-degree shift from my dad’s style. My dad could never really find the words to say he loved me. And no matter how hard I worked on our farm, I could never earn the acceptance or appreciation, the respect or recognition, the praise or pardon I sought from my dad. He just couldn’t bring himself around to recognizing the goodness in the work I did or acknowledging my evolving character as a person.

The high school years were tense years between my father and me. Dad couldn’t bring himself around to visit me during my two-week stay in the hospital after falling off the barn in my freshman year and he couldn’t bring himself around to attending even one of my cross country meets during my junior and senior year of high school. I received numerous honors and awards from 4-H and FFA plus recognitions from church and school. But none of these honors or recognitions made up for the lack of acceptance and recognition from my own father. A simple “That-a-boy,” “Thank You” or “You did a great job” would have made a huge difference in my life.

Clearly, my dad wanted me to be a carbon copy or clone of my older brother. “Why can’t you be more like Ron?” was a phrase I heard repeatedly. The harder he pushed for me to be someone I was not, the more I pushed back and, in essence, said “This is who I am.” I was a curious, spontaneous, and energetic kid and I didn’t want to be a carbon copy of my older brother; I wanted to live my own life. So, I was very happy to leave home for Wisconsin State College-River Falls (now UW-River Falls) in the fall of 1963. The motto at River Falls was “Where the free spirit prevails” so I felt right at home in that setting!

Things didn’t improve with my dad during the college years. The ultimate insult came as Kristi and I were dating each other and planning to get married. I went to visit my father as he was being treated for cancer at UW-Hospital. I had hoped we could reconcile our differences but that became impossible when he said, “If things fall through for you and Kristi, I hope you will let Ron have her.” WOW! I simply couldn’t

find the words to respond and walked out on him. Kristi and I were married on June 22, 1968 and dad died three months later in September 1968 without us ever having reconciled with each other. It was a lost opportunity for both of us and my father never got to witness our marriage, our kids, our grandkids, our home, or my work or volunteer life. I clearly regret that.

Now, let me shift gears. So, what do we know about forgiveness? Let me highlight some of the learnings from the book Exploring Forgiveness, edited by Robert Enright (a UW-Madison Education professor) and Joanna North. A definition of forgiveness is provided by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Forgiveness is taking seriously the awfulness of what has happened when you are treated unfairly. It is opening the door for the other person to have a chance to begin again. Without forgiveness, resentment builds in us, a resentment which turns into hostility and anger. And Archbishop Tutu summarizes by saying “Hatred eats away at our well-being...Without forgiveness, there is no future.”

Here are some other thoughts from Enright’s and North’s book Exploring Forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is principally an internal change of heart and mind, even while being directed at others
2. It involves mentally “reframing” the situation, by separating the wrong doer from the wrong done
3. Forgiveness is hard work and demands that we not get caught up in the mean-spiritedness of our times
4. It doesn’t mean that we forget the hurt, condone the hurt or absolve other persons of responsibility
5. It does mean that that we let go of the hate and anger; resentment and revenge are destructive feelings
6. Often the person that benefits most from forgiving is the forgiver, by letting go of the hate and anger
7. Forgiveness is one person’s response to injury; reconciliation involves two people coming together
8. True reconciliation requires forgiveness, acceptance of forgiveness, self-forgiveness and repentance
9. Once a person has forgiven another person for an “unforgivable” hurt, nothing is likely to be perceived as unforgivable again; we develop resiliency from recognizing that we can deal with other hurts in the future

And this last point brings me back to my story. I was never able to reconcile with my father while he was still alive but a Manhood weekend I attended several decades ago helped me to see that my father was likely deprived of affection from his own parents. He probably grew up in a stern, rigid family environment where love, acceptance, appreciation and forgiveness were openly discouraged and, thus, he became a father who was physically present but emotionally distant...at least with me! I have come to

forgive him, mostly, and to appreciate the resilience gained from growing up with this unforgiving father. Fortunately, my mother understood the situation and did her best to mediate tensions between the two of us!

Now, those of us that have lived in families for any length of time (53 3/4 years for Kristi and me) know that there are dozens of opportunities for forgiveness on a weekly basis; heck, there are days with dozens of opportunities for forgiveness! Does this mean we go around saying “I forgive you...I forgive you...I forgive you” all day long? I’m not sure about your family, but that doesn’t happen in our family!

Yet, when the piercing look in another person’s eyes dissipates, when there is a caring tone in the voice and when the relationship takes on a loving feel again, then we know we are forgiven...and these are magical moments when they do occur! Should we verbalize our forgiveness with greater regularity? Probably, because it would offer a chance to let go of the anger and resentment that can build during a hurtful act. And letting go of anger and resentment can offer healing for both persons and their relationship.

Gee, I’ll have to make a note to verbalize my forgiveness in the future! Amen.