

“Faith to Forgive”

The Fourth Sermon in a Lenten Series on the Lord's Prayer

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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I want to tell you a story. It's a true story. It was first reported by CNN in 2005 under the banner headline "Man Begg Wife's Forgiveness"

"Marianne finally left Larry. 'It was a culmination of things,' Larry said. Marianne left their home in Orlando, Florida and went to her parents' home in Jacksonville. She changed her cell phone so he couldn't reach her. Her parents blocked him from entering their gated community. So he sent her five dozen roses. His goal was to ask forgiveness, to plead for another chance for the two of them to work on their relationship.

When none of his actions brought any response from his estranged wife, Larry took out a full-page ad in the Florida Times-Union on January 25, 2005. The ad read: 'I can only hope you will give me the chance to prove my unending love for you. Life without you is empty and meaningless.'

The cost of a full-page ad meant that Larry had just given Marianne a \$17,000 apology. But it didn't succeed. A relative told Larry that Marianne had seen the ad but simply cried and put it down on the table. "So far" Larry said at the end of the article, "I've had no further response from her."

Now the reason I'm telling you this story is probably not what you think. I'm not telling you the story to show how hard it is to forgive someone. I'm telling you the story to show you how easy it is to misunderstand forgiveness.

Lew Smedes was for many years Professor of Theology and Ethics at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. He wrote two of the best books on forgiveness that I've ever read. And in both of them, he says repeatedly that we struggle so much with forgiveness because of our misconceptions about what it is. So here's a list I keep in the back of my mind to help me remember what forgiveness isn't.

Forgiveness isn't tolerating something that's wrong. And it isn't excusing someone who wrongs us. It isn't believing forgiveness depends on our ability to forget or

deciding justice doesn't matter. No ... forgiveness isn't any of these things, according to Dr. Smedes and that's why Jesus' teaching about forgiveness starts out with two words in Luke 17, "watch yourselves." It's a warning. It means watch the way you think. For the way you think about forgiveness determines the way you act.

Larry thought asking forgiveness meant trying to show Marianne how much he loved her. So he took out a \$17,000 ad in a newspaper. But it didn't ask for forgiveness did it? It simply showed that Larry still loved his wife. And the truth is, you can love someone, and still need their forgiveness.

That's why every time I read Jesus words, I wonder. I wonder if he was remembering a story, and trying to help his disciples remember it too. It's the first story in the Bible that uses the word "forgive." It's found in the Book of Genesis, but not where you probably think. It's found at the end of Genesis, in the last part of the story of Joseph and his brothers.

I'm sure you remember the earlier parts of the story; how Joseph's brothers want to kill him but decide to sell him into slavery, how he's imprisoned in Egypt then released to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, how a famine arises that brings Joseph's brothers to Egypt to buy food, how Joseph finally reveals himself to them and tells them to bring their father and their families to Egypt so he can provide for them. And at the end of Genesis that's where they all are, Joseph and his brothers; they're all together in Egypt, but their father has just died.

So the brothers start to worry about their situation. "It may be," they say, "that now Joseph will hate us; pay us back for all the evil we did to him." So they send a message to Joseph. It says, "your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'"

And yes, it was a backhanded way to ask for forgiveness. And yes it was based on less than the truth, but remember ... the way you think about forgiveness determines the way you act it out. The brothers thought forgiveness was a guarantee, a guarantee of their safety, a guarantee that Joseph wouldn't take revenge on them now that their father wasn't there to stop him.

But notice now how Genesis says Joseph responded. "Joseph wept," Scripture says, "when they spoke to him." Was it because they had finally asked him for

forgiveness even if it was in a backhanded way? We don't know but we do know this. We know what he said, "Am I in the place of God?" he asked them.

And that means my friends that Joseph understood. He understood forgiveness isn't deciding justice doesn't matter. It does, and Joseph's question points forward to a day when God Himself will call his brothers to account. But Joseph knows he can trust God to be a just judge. It was the way he thought about forgiveness that enable Joseph to forgive.

"Watch yourselves" Jesus says in Luke. Pay attention to how you think about forgiveness. For the way you think about forgiveness determines the way you act on it.

You see, if you think forgiveness means trying to convince yourself justice doesn't matter when you know it does. And because you know it does, you might find yourself holding on to a grudge instead of a desire to grant forgiveness, trying to find a way to get even instead of trying to find a way to forgive. But there is a way to move towards forgiveness.

"If a brother or a sister sins against you," Jesus says. And those are the sins that hurt the most aren't they? The sins that come to us from our family. And it doesn't matter if we're talking about our natural family or the family of the church. "If a brother or a sister sins against you," Jesus says, let them know what they have done, "rebuke them and if they repent, forgive them" over and over and over.

And you probably noticed the reaction Jesus' words caused among his apostles. Because they made the connection. They understood what Jesus was asking them to do. And they understood that had no power to do it. So they said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

And Jesus replied, "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed ..." and, well, you know the rest, don't you? But now do you see what Jesus was really telling them and us? He's saying that the faith it takes to forgive doesn't need to be large but it's got to be real. It's got to be real enough to do what God calls you to do.

When Beth Moore and her husband, Keith, spent time a few years ago in Angola, "I learned something," she says, "in one of the rural villages, that will mark my teaching and response to God's word for the rest of my life. As we stood there, trying to absorb the sights and smells of famine and death in one of the small villages we visited, our new friend, Isaac Pretorius, said, 'One of the most

frustrating things is that in these villages when they receive seed, they often eat the seed rather than planting it and bringing forth a harvest.'

I couldn't get that statement out of my mind," Beth says, "and suddenly I had an answer to the question I often ask God: Why do some people see results as disciples of Jesus Christ, while others don't? Many of us have read books on forgiving people, known the teachings were true and right, cried over them, marked them up with highlighters ... yet we remain in our bitterness. Why? Because we ate the seed, instead of sowing it."

So maybe you're wondering right now, what it would look like for me to sow a seed of forgiveness? If you are then listen to this story. Of all things, it comes from a pastor in Clovis, California named Tim Brown.

"Some time ago," he says, "I was having lunch in McDonald's with my daughter and mother-in-law. We were enjoying our lunch and our conversation when a man plopped down at a nearby table with his wife and children. The man was someone I knew. He had said things about me in private and in public that simply weren't true.

We exchanged "Hello's," but I could begin to feel my blood boil at the memory of what he'd done to me and I was surprised how fresh my wounds felt as I sat back down at the table. Thankfully my family and were almost finished eating. We took one last bite and got up to leave.

As we did though, we overheard "my enemy" and his wife arguing because neither one of them had their wallet with them. The waitress was walking toward them carrying their food on a tray. Their three kids were screaming for their "Happy Meals." And my first thought was, "There's justice in this world after all. He deserves to be embarrassed. I'm glad I get to see this."

Then suddenly a Scripture I read that morning came back to me, "Don't repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what's right ... Don't take revenge, my friends, rather leave room for God's final judgment ... so if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he's thirsty, give him something to drink"

It was "as if God was saying to me: 'Here's your chance to be set free from your memory of this guy and your past with him.' And I knew," Tim says, "that I had a choice to try and start the process of forgiveness with this guy or bask in my bitterness. So slowly and to tell the truth reluctantly I reached in my wallet. I

pulled out a twenty dollar bill and I handed it to him. 'Have lunch on me,' I said. And I left McDonald's that day hoping God would use my words and my actions to call "my enemy" to repentance so I could complete the process of forgiving him.

"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed," Jesus says, "if you're willing to put your faith in God's ability to use you as an agent in someone else's life to try and bring about real forgiveness, then you can say to the hurt that's as deeply rooted in your soul as a mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea' and it will obey you."

So this week, as you pray the fourth line of the Lord's Prayer with me. And I hope you will. After you say the words, "and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" remember. Remember what it really means to pray those words and not just say them. Remember that it means to trust that God can work forgiveness through you in the same way that he offers forgiveness to you. Leave justice to the one who judges justly and let God lead you to sow a seed of forgiveness.

Let's pray