

March 8, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN

Third Sunday in Lent
Luke 6:23-28
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A FORGIVING HEART

Today marks the 50th anniversary of civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama. In early spring of 1965, a march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery had been planned, in an effort to obtain voting rights and polling access for all. But this day came to be known as “Bloody Sunday” as peaceful protesters who tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge were tear-gassed and beaten by the bully clubs of state and local police. People across the country watched in horror on the televised news that night, and the national outrage that ensued eventually pushed the passage of landmark legislation, our national Voting Right Act of the 1960s. As our President Obama stated, in leading thousands in a commemorative march yesterday across that same Selma bridge, the work of Selma “is not over yet.”

As I have thought about Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness this week, I have found myself wondering: How is it that people are able to love their enemies through events like those of the civil rights era? How do we speak of such love, and of the practice of forgiveness, in a nation where racial disparity and divides are still such a deep part of our experience as a nation? The legacy of slavery is deep in our history. I know that my New England ancestors, while not slave owners themselves, surely benefited financially from an early economic system bolstered by the profits of the slave trade. What is the interplay between national repentance and forgiveness for sins and the inner workings of repentance and forgiveness in our own, individual hearts? Do national hearts “harden” sometimes, just as individuals’ do?

These are perplexing and disturbing questions for me this morning, for which I don’t have ready answers. But as we move on the “Lenten Journey of the Heart” this Lenten season at Falcon Heights Church, our text brings us the teachings of Jesus about loving enemies and forgiveness. Henri Nouwen, the 20th century Catholic priest, theologian and author, once wrote: “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.” (Henri J. M. Nouwen, “The Only Necessary Thing: Living A Prayerful Life,” p. 153)

Perhaps this is a place to start: acknowledging that we are all part of this “fellowship of the weak that is the human family.” Jesus was quite perceptive on this point, and he challenged people beyond custom and niceties by offering spiritual practices that would help us in our weakness. In today’s verses from Luke, Jesus has just come down off a nearby mountain, after a time of prayer

and conversation with his closest followers. He's surrounded now with the larger crowd of disciples, men and women who are following him from town to town, and people who have come from Judea, Jerusalem, as well as the coastal cities, to hear him. Word has gotten out and people press forward. "All the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them all," writes Luke.

In the middle of all this commotion, Jesus "lifted up his eyes on his disciples" and starts in teaching again. He launches into his call to loving our enemies. This is the context in which he speaks of forgiveness. And here, the challenge of Christian loving punches through any idealized notion of polite niceties and sweet harmony. Love your enemies. This is the love that enables people, with fierce passivity, to face bully clubs, snarling dogs and tear gas.

I imagine that this call to "love your enemies" hit those listening to Jesus, that first century day, like a verbal grenade. It's not that this idea was entirely new to Judaism, as any good Jew knew that God's mercy fell on the just and the unjust among them. Yes, everyone knew that Hebrew scripture taught that we are all to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Golden Rule business of reciprocity: we should respond in kind, everything comes around. But here Jesus' listeners were given an extraordinary challenge in this business of loving: Love the person who does not carry your best interest at heart. The one who has hurt you, betrayed you, damaged you. How do we get over it when we are offended, or annoyed or even hurt by another's behavior? How do we forgive? We can't seem to forget, but how do these memories soften and change for us? Is it prudent, even, to let this happen?

During my years of ministry in northern California, I met a man named Frederick Luskin who was conducting a research study on forgiveness at Stanford University. The interfaith pastoral counseling center I directed at that time invited him to speak at a public forum on forgiveness that we were sponsoring. Luskin, along with a variety of other mental health professionals, had decided to explore this concept and practice of forgiveness which for centuries been the realm of religion. He wanted to quantify, through interviews and medical exams, whether forgiving someone could improve your emotional or physical health. It's probably no surprise that he discovered that holding onto grudges, resentments and hurts actually stressed people out so much that it disrupted their lives in many measurable ways. He spoke of his work in Ireland, with Protestant and Catholic mothers of those killed in sectarian violence, who were able to come together and hear one another's stories, who were somehow able to forgive what seemed unforgiveable.

I was struck by Luskin's image of what unforgiveness, or unresolved grievances, does to us: *Picture the crowded screen in front of a harried air traffic controller. Picture the chaos in the room and the jumble of planes on the screen. Now imagine that your unresolved grievances are the planes on that screen that*

have been circling for days and weeks on end. Most of the other planes have landed, but your unresolved grievances continue to take up precious air space, draining resources that may be needed in an emergency. Having them on the screen forces you to work harder and increases the chance for accidents. The grievance planes become a source of stress and burnout is often the result. (Frederick Luskin, "Forgive for Good," Introduction, p. vii)

I think of how Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, instructed his followers to ask for daily bread, to ask for forgiveness, and to ask for help in resisting temptation. I have heard it said that we can think of daily bread as relating to our present concerns, forgiveness to our past, and help in temptation to our future. Jesus understood that people had issues with their past, present and future. I find this distinction helpful, especially when it comes to understanding the action of forgiveness in our lives. Forgiveness has to do with how we *live with the past*, how the past dwells in our memory and heart. How we are living with all those grievance planes flying around our screens? How's that working for us?

Something else seems to happen when we are unforgiving. It seems to cloud our ability to perceive current reality. I bumped into these words by Hugh Prather the other day about forgiveness. A pastoral counselor and author of many popular self-help books and spiritual reflections, Prather wrote in his "Morning Notes: 365 Meditations to Wake You Up": "A judgmental feeling about another person is based on the same belief as my fear of making mistakes: I think what someone once did is more important than how the person is now." We tend to do this to ourselves, and to others. The past imprisons us and them. Prather suggests that our challenge is to try encountering people as they are today. Ask God to help you practice meeting people you feel unforgiving towards as if it is the first time you are meeting. As we do this, we will notice immediately whether or not the person's past actions are still lodged in our awareness, because it is going to make perceiving them as they are now really difficult! Prather says we will slowly notice more receptivity, and even possibility, inklings of forgiveness, when we start each encounter with a "clean slate."

Forgiveness does not necessarily rebuild trust or relationships. But for starters, it may help us be less boring! Forgiving helps us let go of that old grievance story we just love to tell...and retell. Yes, it is only the first step, the step we have the opportunity to take, in healing ourselves. Ongoing rebuilding trust and relationships is the work of heartfelt apologies which do not grovel but name the offense clearly. We certainly don't do all this under our own steam. I know I have been able to forgive only by praying for God's sustaining power and hopefulness.

Finally, I wonder what forgiveness this might look like for us as a nation, to name the offense of slavery, and the years of racial injustice and inequality that have unfolded since then, clearly? What does it look like in congregations where there has been conflict, where those who have offended begin to name the

offenses clearly? We all “love poorly” at times, God help us. Loving our enemies seems impossible. But the spiritual practice of forgiveness helps us clear *our* side of the street and de-clutter the “precious air space” of our minds. It allows for hardened hearts to soften. May forgiving hearts continue to grow within each of us. Amen.