

Embodying Forgiveness
Epiphany 7C/Sexagesima
Luke 6:27-38

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Today's gospel is not easy. It forces us to confront the most painful times in our lives—the times that we were mocked, wounded, scorned, or mistreated—and equally the times that we mocked, wounded, scorned, or mistreated others, even if it was only in words, even if it was behind their backs. For today's gospel cuts to the heart of our moments of shame, as both victim and victimizer. The gospel speaks to our most fraught or broken relationships, often relationships that we would rather forget. This gospel requires us to face the truth about what we really think and how we really feel, and calls us to do something that might change others—or not—but that will certainly change us, if we let it.

Whether we are the ones who offer forgiveness or beg for mercy, what Jesus has to say here matters. Jesus calls us to face our enemies and figure out what to do with the evil in our lives. And, as preacher, I have the unenviable task of trying to unpack Jesus' words without telling you what to do or having you feel that the church cares more about forgiveness than it does about you. For though the timing and shape of forgiveness can never be dictated, Jesus obliges us to acknowledge our own fallen humanity and that of those around us. And if we accept that Jesus' words are true, that requires us to offer (or accept) some measure of grace as we ask God to work through what is often deeply seated, long held, scarring, searing pain.

I ask one thing of you, as you listen today, and that is this: Think for a moment about someone who has wronged you in some way. It doesn't have to be someone who is or was capital-letter-a-Abusive toward you, but it should be someone you feel has wronged you and with whom there is yet no resolution.

And now, think for a moment about someone you, yourself, have wronged. And hold those people in your heart as we seek to discover the truly good news in this most difficult teaching about loving our enemies.

When I think about my enemies and those who think of me as their enemy, I find that Jesus' teaching about loving our enemies is not at all straightforward. What he tells us, the comfort and consolation he offers, the charge that he gives us, are some of the most challenging words in the Gospel. And yet, because Jesus himself had enemies, those who crucified him, the friends and disciples who betrayed and denied and abandoned him, I know that this teaching is to be received in the light of the resurrection, wherein Jesus offers forgiveness even to the worst enemies, and even to the worst parts of ourselves. For divine love of one's enemies is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. It's just that many of us have reserved a few people in our hearts whom we wonder whether we could ever find it in our hearts to love in any meaningful sense of that word. Or, for that matter, who could ever offer us that love in return.

If such is true for you, there's no need for you to feel guilty about that. But we are confronted together with these words that Jesus said, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

How on earth are we supposed to live up to that standard?

The answer (or at least part of it), I think, is this: We cannot get there all at once. Just as no one commits great evil without having taken many, many smaller steps along the path, so, too, no one is capable of great forgiveness without first taking tiny baby steps that set the stage. We train our hearts and our behaviours day by day, hour by hour. Our challenge is to be diligent in letting little things go, forgiving the daily slights, so that when our time of trial comes—as it inevitably will—we will have laid the groundwork, with God's help, for our heart to respond to God's forgiving grace. We will have learned what it means to forgive others and to accept that we are forgiven.

Part of the problem is, as L. Gregory Jones points out in his book *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, that we tacitly accept that justice and forgiveness cannot coexist in this world. And so we absolve ourselves from feeling any pity towards our enemies, and we resist any compunction that might somehow soften our hardened and jaded hearts. But according to Jones, forgiveness is "not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life."

In other words, Christian forgiveness is a craft to be learned, a skill of the heart to practice, a way of life to share—not through ordination or professional training but simply by living as disciples of Jesus, whose forgiveness transforms us. Through participation in a community equally committed to learning and living what it means to embody forgiveness, we are empowered by grace to transmit the ways of forgiveness to others, both inside and outside the Church.

If we feel daunted by the task, perhaps it is enough for now to know that we are not alone when it comes to learning and teaching the ways of forgiveness. And Lent in particular gives us an opportunity to learn, or learn again, what it means to practice repentance and receive forgiveness through confessing our sins, so that we may experience for ourselves what it feels like to be forgiven. In fact, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter together comprise an intensive annual "master class," if you will, in becoming forgiving disciples within a forgiving community. In this way, we become better-equipped to offer Christ's forgiveness to others.

The question, then, is whether we will attend to the Master who teaches this class. Are we willing to subject our own consciences to the practices that embody forgiveness? Are we willing to own up to

the many ways that we have mocked, wounded, scorned, or mistreated others? Perhaps then we will find ourselves in the position of discovering the Easter joy of forgiving others and ourselves.

[9:30] In a few minutes, you will hear me say, “Dear friends in Christ, God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy; he welcomes sinners and invites them to his table. Let us confess our sins, confident in God’s forgiveness.”

[11:00] In a few minutes, you will hear the deacon say, “Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead the new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees.”

When you/we hear this invitation, I hope that you will hear it in light of this morning’s gospel: as a precondition for loving your enemies. I asked you at the beginning of this sermon to think about someone who has wronged you in some way, and to think about someone you, yourself, have wronged. Keep those people in your heart as you make your confession and ask God to guide you as you seek whatever reconciliation is possible and whatever restitution may be necessary. If you do so, it may not seem like much. It may not, in fact, be enough. But every day we are invited to begin again to embody forgiveness, and to embrace what it means to be a community that is both forgiven and forgiving.

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