

**Forgiveness: A Way of Life, A Path of Faith, A Particular Song of Grace**  
**Sandy Reimer** **March 1, 2009**

**SCRIPTURE –**

- Unison - Our Father, Our Mother, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,
- Women - And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass  
against us. (*Service Book and Hymnal, of the Lutheran Church  
in America*)
- Men - And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
(*Matthew 6: 12, NRSV*)
- Women - Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs  
that others have done to us. (*Matthew 6:12, Good News Bible*)
- Men - Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands  
we hold of others' guilt. (*Neil Douglas Klotz*)
- Women - In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. (*Jim Cotton*)
- Men - Let forgiveness flow like a river between us, from each one to  
each one to each one. (*Parker Palmer*)
- Unison - And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
Forever (and ever). Amen.

Luke 6:37 – Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you receive.

Two things that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism all hold as foundational spiritual values are loving your neighbor as you love yourself and practicing forgiveness. I imagine that no one in this room would disagree about the importance of these values.

There are three scenarios of forgiveness:

- forgiving ourselves
- accepting forgiveness from someone else or from God
- forgiving someone who has hurt us.

Each Lenten season, as part of the Ash Wednesday service, we offer two suggestions for specific spiritual practices during Lent. Those of you who were here this week on Ash Wednesday know that one focus this year is on raising the sail in your own life to catch the winds of grace that are always blowing around us. The second Lenten focus is to let go of something for which you need to forgive yourself or for which you need to accept that you are forgiven.

There is a reason why forgiveness is a spiritual practice. Forgiveness, of others and ourselves, takes time and cannot be forced. It takes prayer; it takes intentionality; it takes a belief in and a commitment to transformation. We let forgiveness grow like a seed within us until that seed ripens and is ready to be released from its shell. So our Ash Wednesday symbol of forgiving ourselves is a small bag of seeds that each of us will keep until we are ready, and then sometime before Easter, we will scatter those seeds on the earth as a sign that we are ready to let go, ready to move on, ready to accept that we are forgiven.

This morning, I want to look at the third scenario of forgiveness, forgiving someone who has hurt us. I want you to think for a moment of a situation when someone forgave you for something you did. Just go with whatever comes to mind first – and think about that person and think about that forgiveness. Raise your hand if you've ever been forgiven for something that you did.

Now think of a time when someone refused to forgive you, even though you apologized, even though you tried to make amends. Think about that impass; think of what it was like for you. Raise your hand if you've ever been in that situation where someone refused to forgive you.

I mention these two scenarios because I think it is so important to remember what it feels like to be forgiven and how painful it is not to be forgiven. I mention these two scenarios so that we remember not just in words, but in our heart and in our bodies, how crucial forgiveness is in human relationships. Just as an engine cannot run without oil because its parts will grind upon one another and destroy the machine, so human relationships cannot survive without forgiveness.

I think we all understand that; I think we all agree. We read all those beautiful lines together just a minute ago: forgiving others who are in debt to us, who have hurt us, who have wronged us, whose guilt we hold, and let forgiveness flow like a river between us.

But then life happens, and situations arise when we find it difficult to forgive someone who has wounded and hurt us. I know that happens to me. I can slip right into the "yes, but" mode, making excuses about why I can't quite let go of the situation. Sometimes I just want to hold onto my anger for a while. Sometimes I don't want to deal with the issue or the person, and so I shut down and retreat into silence and self-absorption.

And that is why, for me, forgiveness is a spiritual practice. I keep practicing it, reminding myself when I stray into snippiness or hardening of my heart, that I need to get back on the path. I pray about it; I think of the people who have forgiven me; I remember the words of the charismatic African American preacher James Forbes, who says, "Is there any one among us – any one - who has not made withdrawals from the bank of grace?"

I practice forgiveness, just like I practice my sermons. And, while sometimes I'm getting better at it, it's also true that sometimes I slipslide backwards into the pit and have to start over again.

I've preached at least four sermons on forgiveness. There are copies of the last one, from January a year ago, on the counter in the foyer and you'll find in it my

reminder that forgiveness does not mean condoning harmful behavior; it does not mean relinquishing our ethics. Instead, forgiveness is about relinquishing my own resentment, my own anger, and sometimes my own wish for payback. Forgiveness means that I do not have to be a puppet of the past.

I grew up in a large extended family of my grandparent's generation. My grandmother was the oldest of eleven children; my grandfather was the second child of ten children. I remember that, in their extended families, there was always someone not speaking to someone else because of something that had happened. My great-aunt Nora developed that into the fine art of cutting off people forever, including my father, whom she never forgave for some unknown offense that we could never figure out. She died an isolated bitter woman. As I look back, I realize that somehow my grandparents managed not to get embroiled in the fights and feuds, and they are my touchstones when I find myself drawn back into old patterns of nursing grievances.

We forgive others for the sake of ourselves, for the sake of our own souls, so that we can be the loving people we want to be, so that we can live the faith we believe in, so that we can bring healing into the world. And the only path to forgiveness is practice, over and over again. You may remember that I always caution us to begin, not with the hardest situation to forgive, but with the easier one, the one we are ready to let go. We start and practice with the small things because that prepares us for the hard times that inevitably come, when we are called to forgive in very difficult situations. I always wonder, if I were really tested, would I be prepared, would I be able to forgive in the worst case scenario.

The documentary, "The Power of Forgiveness," by Martin Doblmeier takes us to those hard places, among school children in Northern Ireland, a mother whose son died at Ground Zero, the Amish community after the schoolhouse killings, Israeli students at the German Parliament, the Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut. And we see real life people who are able to live forgiveness, not because they are saints, but because they view forgiveness as a decision they have made about how they will live their life. As one says, "You can forgive a little. You can forgive all the way. You can forgive not at all. It is a journey that you take. Ultimately, forgiveness is something you do for your own sake."

We're going to see the last chapter in this documentary, an example of forgiveness that I find very powerful. I ask you to stay open to the story. Pay attention to the tendency we all have to say, "Yes, but you can't excuse what happened." - "Yes, but it isn't fair." "Yes, but this is an isolated case." Whatever "yes, but" – whatever resistance you have to the story – let that simply pass by and see if you can simply be open to let the story speak with its own power – and most of all to let it inspire you in your own journey of forgiveness.

## **Prayer –**

If all the conflict in the world could be resolved like this, what would the world look like? What would the world look like, God?

What would my world look like? What would my life look like?

I pray for that world to be born within me.

I pray for your light to shine on a hardened place in my heart.

I pray for your love to shine on a wounded place in my soul.

I pray to practice the forgiveness I want to receive.

I pray to receive the forgiveness I want to practice.

And when I forget, and when I slip, I pray to begin anew, again and again.

May forgiveness flow like a river in my life; may forgiveness flow like a river in this world, from each one to each one to each one.

Amen. Blessed be.