

## THE CROSS & FORGIVENESS (PT.2) | APRIL 5, 2020

*"Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God." (Ephesians 5.2)*

### ATTRACT

A few of weeks ago I was booked to officiate a wedding, but the COVID-19 crisis put the day in jeopardy. As rentals and public spaces shut down around the Province, the couple had to adapt fast. Rather than cancelling, they chose to host a small, intimate ceremony in a back yard. They asked, given the situation, if I was still willing to officiate. I agreed, reminding them that Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John was at a wedding, when during the reception they ran out of wine. That was one kind of crisis, and this was just another. And I can tell you that plenty of love and joy was bubbling up that afternoon, just like it always does when two people offer and pledge themselves to one another. And at the big moment in the ceremony when I usually say, "you may now kiss the bride", I was very tempted to say, "you may now cease from social distancing", but as we're still in the season of Lent I resisted that temptation. After all the scrambling they were finally married. Nothing could stop Love in the Time of Coronavirus.

But a small shadow was cast on my own heart that afternoon. While planning on the fly I was told to make sure I moved out of the way when the big kiss happened because, and I quote, "there's nothing worse than a pastor's face ruining a photo". Now I know I'm no supermodel, and I the request was a reasonable one. No harm was meant, but that comment stung a little. It might sound silly, but here I was, turning up, doing all I could to help, and all someone was concerned about was that my ugly mug wouldn't ruin the photos. I responded with a slightly passive aggressive joke saying that many pastors would argue that there's nothing worse than a photographer's flash ruining a sacred moment. That comment leapt from of my mouth like a plague frog out of Exodus. I'd had been shoved, and ever so subtly, I shoved back.

## **INFORM**

The saying goes that "hurt people hurt people", and though we might like to reserve a label like "hurt" for those really damaged people, you know, the people other than us, the little nicks and cuts we each carry all add up. Everyone has been hurt, and everyone has done some hurting. Forgiveness, then, both our need to receive it and our need to extend it, applies to us all. If we don't learn how to forgive the cycle of hurt will only ever continue.

In our text today St. Paul tells us two things. First, that we can learn how to forgive by following Jesus' example. And second, Paul reminds us of our own need of forgiveness.

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### **Learning to Forgive**

According to St. Paul Learning to forgive begins with following the example of Christ. This week is Holy Week – a week that depicts for us in startling clarity who God really is. God is the humble king, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. God is the foot-washing servant, even cleaning the mucky feet of his betrayer. God is the silent defendant, presenting no argument, spat on, and falsely accused. God is even the gracious crucifixion victim, letting his torturers off the hook while he hangs on nails. "Forgive them", says Jesus, through bloodied lips and clenched teeth, "they don't know what they're doing."

The story goes that a Hebrew School teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with a class of five and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to "honour your father and mother", they asked the class if there was a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters. Without missing a beat, a girl in the front row shot up her hand and answered, "thou shalt not kill?"

Jesus' life is an example which points us far beyond not simply killing each other. Jesus' teaches us to forgive one another. No matter what you think about Jesus, God or not, that is Jesus' legacy.

So for a follower of Christ the way of forgiveness is the way our faith goes. Difficult as it may seem, there is no other path with God. Following the example of Christ, means following in his footsteps of love and forgiveness. At times it may feel like a kind of death. But there is no other way towards resurrection, no other road to life and love.

Of course, that's easier said than done. What about the survivors of neglect or abuse? What about the deep wounds we carry from childhood or adolescence? What about the pain our parents or spouses or pastors or friends have caused us? The hurt we've experienced, the wounds we carry are real, and they need to be acknowledged and embraced. But the other side of that coin, is the question of what happens to us if we don't learn to forgive, if we don't allow these wounds the chance to heal? Nelson Mandela said that "resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemy to die." The path of forgiveness might feel hard or painful, but by every definition in the Bible, forgiveness is a gift not only to the receiver, but the giver also. If we don't forgive, we'll be eaten alive by evil. That doesn't mean we should needlessly put ourselves in harm's way. It doesn't mean we should neglect putting up healthy boundaries with people who will routinely hurt us. It just means that God's given us the gift of doing something with the pain we caused one another, and the gift is forgiveness. Fred Rogers said, "The only thing evil can't stand is forgiveness." So we could say that forgiveness is the antidote to evil.

So the path of forgiveness is the path for all of us. Our steps might be small, even infrequent at times, but Jesus invites us into those steps non-the-less by his own example. That's why we must talk about "learning to forgive", rather than speaking about forgiveness as something we do all in one shot. Steps will look different for each of us, and I doubt any of us will ever master forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't an end result, it's a way of living in a wounded earth, waiting for heaven's full healing. A professor of mine used to say that "grace is getting what we don't deserve, and mercy is not getting what we deserve." Jesus invites us to be people of grace and mercy. This kind of cross-shaped life, then, is a life of offering. Paul says, "be like Christ, who offered his life, a pleasing aroma..." What does forgiveness smell like? Maybe forgiveness smells like a field of wildflowers in a spring rain after a long winter. Maybe forgiveness smells like a well-prepared meal as you walk in the door

after a long, tiring journey. The point is, forgiveness smells good, because it originates from the same place all good things originate: God's compassionate heart.

Learning to forgive one another is God's gift to us, even if it's tough, perhaps especially when it's tough. And learning to forgive is deeply rooted in the second truth emerging from Paul's words. If the first truth is, we must learn to forgive like Jesus, the second is that we must always remember our own need of forgiveness.

### **Our Need of Forgiveness**

St Paul says, "Christ died for us...". In other words, we all need forgiveness. Jesus tells a story in Luke's gospel of two men who went to church. One came in and began praying, "Thank you God that I'm not like other people, that I've got my life together, and that I pray and give money to the poor and even fast during the season of Lent". The other, says Jesus, came in and prayed "God, I'm backward. Sometimes I don't even know why I do the things I do. Please give me a break, Lord. I'm in need of a lot of grace this week." Then Jesus said, "People who think they're better than other people are sadly mistaken." Well, the story went something like that - you get the point.

There's a little bit of that arrogant voice whispering in all of our ears, isn't there? The voice says, "the problem's with everyone else", "you're not so bad, compared to those people". If we listen to it, we'll live under the delusion that we don't need forgiveness ourselves. But we do. We need God's forgiveness, because we make mistakes every day. We need the forgiveness of others, because we step on one another's toes every day, on some days occasionally stomping on one another's toes.

So, building on Paul's earlier words, we must learn how to forgive by watching Jesus' example, and we do that by always remembering that we need forgiveness ourselves, and receiving it. Sure, we could grade one another, asking who needs more forgiveness and who needs less. But comparison is a killer, and Jesus never points us to what divides us as human beings, but to what unites us. And we're

united by the reality that we all need forgiveness; we're united by the good news that God gives grace to everyone.

That's what the cross is all about. As Ricky shared last week, Jesus didn't die on every hill, just one. Just one hill where forgiveness was taken care of for all of us and all of time. So the cross is where we find the power and strength to forgive, because the cross is where God swallowed up sin and evil in one gulp. We don't have to absorb the sin of other people, Jesus did that on the cross. We just have to cling onto that splintery cross for dear life, soaking up the grace God give us each day, and offering that same grace to one another. As the saying goes, "Christianity is just one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread." We're all hungry, we all need a hearty meal of grace. When we forgive, we're simply inviting one another to the table to dine with us.

## **MOVE**

### **Lent**

So those are two thoughts to take away from our reading today: We've been given the gift, the invitation, of learning how to forgive based on Jesus' example. And we do this by remembering our own need of forgiveness and receiving it.

This is the final week of Lent. And some would argue that if Lent is about anything, it's about wrestling with forgiveness. Our four invitations this Lent have been: put something down and pick something up; pray in community; read the story; and don't forget to party. How can we do those things this week with forgiveness in mind?

What do we need to put down, to place into God's hands, what resentment or unforgiveness; and what do we need to pick up from God instead?

How can we pray together about what we're putting down and picking up?

When can we read the story of Jesus in the gospels, a story filled with love and grace, how does that story inspire and soften our hearts so we can learn to forgive?

What can we do to celebrate the fact that we're forgiven by God, always at the drop of a hat because of Jesus and his cross? How can we celebrate the freedom we live in when the burden of resentment or unforgiveness is lifted?

As we sit together in this very unique Holy Week, thinking of the cross ahead, thinking of the resurrection following, is the story still true? Is grace and selflessness and humility still at work in the world?

This month a priest in Italy fell sick with the virus. His parishioners bought him a respirator so he could make a recovery. But he refused to use his respirator, giving it to a younger patient instead. The priest died because of his sacrifice, and there was no funeral. But reportedly the residents in the town applauded from their windows and balconies as the coffin made its way to the burial plot in the graveyard.

We know grace and humility when we see it. May we see it in the life and death and life again of Jesus this week. And may we see it in one another's lives the next.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Share a time you needed to receive or offer forgiveness.
2. Why is forgiveness so tough?
3. What are some unhealthy views of forgiveness we need to steer clear of?
4. What is God speaking to you about forgiveness this Holy Week?