

# **Preaching Forgiveness**

**Sermons and Comments**

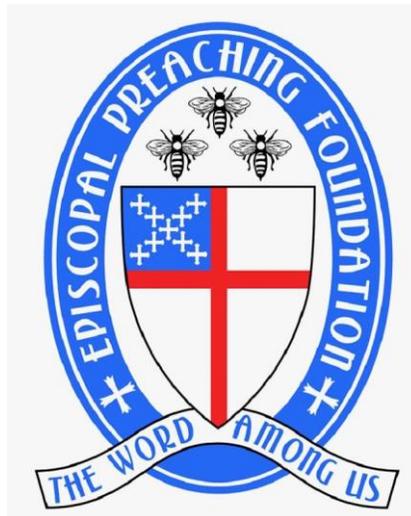
**from the**

**2017 Preaching Excellence Programs**

**Volume XXVI**

# Preaching Forgiveness

Sermons and Comments  
from the  
2017 Preaching Excellence Programs  
Volume XXVI



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and  
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## Table of Contents

<b>2017 Preaching Excellence Programs Faculty</b>	1
<b>Episcopal Preaching Foundation Donors</b>	2
<b>Message from Dr. A. Gary Shilling, Chairman and Founder Of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation</b>	3
<b>Excerpts from “Preach and Teach REACH Forgiveness” By Dr. Everett L. Worthington, Jr.</b>	5
<b>Sermons From The Faculty</b>	
A Sermon by The Rev. Whitney Edward St. Christopher's School, Richmond, Virginia	9
“Waiting for Sightings of Glory” The Rev. Susan Ironside St. John on the Mountain, Bernardsville, New Jersey	13
A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Micah Jackson Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas	17
“The Syrophoenician Woman” The Rev. (Thelma) Nikki Mathis St. Peter’s Church, Atlanta, Georgia	18
A Sermon by The Very Rev. W. (Will) H. Mebane, Jr. St. Paul’s Cathedral, Buffalo, New York	21
“On Forgiveness” The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church, Dublin, Ohio	24



“Indeed, You Can Save France, and Still be Burned at the Stake”  
The Rev. Kate Spelman  
All Saints Episcopal Church, Western Springs, Illinois 27

A Sermon by The Very Rev. Dr. Sylvia Sweeney  
The Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California. 32

**Select Sermons on Forgiving  
Delivered at the Preaching Excellence Programs I and II in 2017**

A Sermon by Anna Broadbent  
Virginia Theological Seminary 34

A Sermon by David Goldberg  
Virginia Theological Seminary 37

A Sermon by Andrew Green  
Seminary of the Southwest 40

“Seeing the Face of God”  
Jeanne Kaliszewski  
Church Divinity School of the Pacific 43

“Turning Around”  
Aaron Klinefelter  
Church Divinity School of the Pacific 46

A Sermon by Brian Prall  
Seminary of the Southwest 49

“On Binding and Loosing”  
The Rev. Joslyn Schaefer  
Grace Church, Waynesville, North Carolina 51

“Generations of Forgiveness”  
Laura Siriani  
Bloy House, The Episcopal School at Claremont 54

“Father, Forgive”  
The Rev. Amy Spagna

Christ Church, Westerly, Ohio 57

A Sermon by Kathleen Walker  
Virginia Theological Seminary 59

A Sermon by Anne Marie Witchger  
General Theological Seminary 63

A Sermon by Ben Wyatt  
Berkeley Theological School at Yale 65

**Award Winning Sermons from the 2017 PLPIT.com  
Sermon Challenge conducted by the  
Office for Science, Theology, and Religion  
Initiatives at Fuller Theological Seminary 68**

**Comments from Seminarians and Priests  
Attending PEP and PEP II 2017 76**



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With deep appreciation and thanks, we acknowledge the following major donors—individuals and foundations—who contributed \$5,000 or more to the ministry and mission of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation this fiscal year.\*

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\* Fiscal Year is July 1 to June 30

**Message from Dr. A. Gary Shilling, Founder and  
Chairman  
Of the  
Episcopal Preaching Foundation**

2017 was an outstanding year for the Episcopal Preaching Foundation in many ways.

The Foundation celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in late May at the Roslyn Retreat Center in Richmond, Virginia with our annual Preaching Excellence Program running concurrently there. The celebration kicked off at All Saints Church on May 30<sup>th</sup>, with our Honorary Chairman, the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, giving a rousing sermon to 750 congregants. The magnificent service's prayers, Bible lessons and hymns all articulated the EPF's mission – Preaching the Word.

This year the EPF had the good fortune to partner with the John Templeton Foundation to integrate studies on forgiveness into the practice of preaching. The study of forgiveness was the focus at EPF's Preaching Excellence Program I and II and the sermons included in this book all reflect the power of forgiving. As part of the John Templeton Foundation's partnership with EPF, an international "Sermon Challenge" was conducted by the Fuller Theological Seminary, through their Office for Science, Theology, and Initiatives. The winners of that sermon challenge are also featured in this book.

The 39 seminarians, who were selected by their seminary deans and preaching professors for their potential in preaching, attended the week-long 2017 PEP conference and were led by a faculty of 9 preaching professors and accomplished parish preachers. Faculty-led workshops provided the seminarians with hands-on help with the art and practice of preaching.

The workshop topics this year included: "Comforting the Afflicted and Afflicting the Comfortable: Practical and Strategic Methods for the Work of Justice in Ministry," "Diaconal Preaching for a Suffering World" and "Preaching the Gospel without Preaching Politics." Additionally, the PEP conferences included the work and research of Dr. Everett Worthington, Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, on understanding forgiveness, its benefits and how people can effectively forgive.

Our 4<sup>th</sup> annual PEP II conference was held at the Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey for 15 parish priests. As with the seminarian program, the theme of

forgiveness was woven into the preaching program. The training was directed to practicing clergy in attendance, with “Bringing Forgiveness to Your Congregation” as the focus. Both programs were highly successful as witnessed by comments from the participants.

As you read these sermons as well as the comments about PEP and PEP II by the attendees (page ##), I hope you agree that the Foundation is making significant strides in improving preaching in the Episcopal Church to the benefit of all of us. We want to thank the John Templeton Foundation, as well as all of the donors who make our work possible, especially the major contributors listed on page 2 of this book.

**A. Gary Shilling, Ph.D.**  
**Chairman**  
**Episcopal Preaching Foundation**  
**October 2017**

## Excerpts from “Preach and Teach REACH Forgiveness”

By Dr. Everett L. Worthington, Jr.

### Should You Enter into a Concerted Effort to Preach and Teach Forgiveness in Your Congregation?

Forgiveness is essential in Christianity, but recognizing that is far different than considering whether you, as Rector, should enter into a program in which you seek to preach and teach forgiveness. You need to make an eyes-open decision before jumping in.

#### Consider Theology

Consider the theology. Some have argued that forgiveness is *the* centerpiece of Christianity—forgiveness of humans by God and forgiveness of humans by other humans. Others have asserted that love holds the pre-eminent place of honor in Christianity, and Jesus, when asked what the most important commandments were (Luke 10:26), taught this: “He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (NIV; Luke 10:27; see also Matt 22:36-38). And certainly a case could be made for justice and practicing humility as well. In Micah 6:8, we read, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (NIV). Certainly, though, forgiveness is a practice not only recommended to Christians, but commanded (Matt 6:14-15).

But saying that something is theologically crucial does not mean we should necessarily make it a central focus of preaching and teaching for some period. There are many ways that the virtue of forgiveness might be encouraged, preached, taught, and nurtured. And there are many priorities in Christian formation across the lifespan. Let’s consider some additional things.

#### Consider Your Motivations

Reflect on your goals. Most rectors want to participate in God’s call to change lives to form the mind of Christ within people. That includes promoting forgiveness using at least four ways. These four ways of helping people become more forgiving include (1) the personal practice of forgiveness, (2) powerful preaching of forgiveness, (3) targeted teaching of forgiveness, and (4) advancing administration of a program that spreads the targeted teaching of forgiveness (a) within the congregation to families, to individuals, to

children, to classes, to small groups, to friends, to co-workers, and to congregants (regular or less frequent attenders) and (b) through the congregation into the world through the congregants’ work, life, and community involvement. Thus, most rectors’ goals are to form more forgiving people, to form more forgiving congregation, and to form a more forgiving world.

### Consider Your People

What do you know about the people in your care? Are their divorces? Conflicts and bitter unforgiveness between partners? Struggles between parents and their children? How about life within the congregation? Do your elders and deacons disagree, engage in power struggles, and hold onto hurts? Do you have tension and conflict with the other leaders of your congregation, or with the denominational leadership? Has your church had a history of divisiveness, with splits, near splits, and families leaving because they did not feel valued? Are there hurt feelings among members of the congregation? What about people's work situations? Do you know of people having conflict at work with an intolerant supervisor or cantankerous co-workers or rebellious and disrespectful supervisees? How would you evaluate the people in your congregation? Are they quick to forgive and let bygones be bygones? Is there conflict and unforgiveness against social institutions, or is there societal disaffection and alienation?

If your people are not beset by such problems—or at least not inordinately—then great. But, if you can name many needy parishioners, then you might consider how to encourage changes

As a rector, you care about how people might be formed in Christ-like character within the church and within the family, but how they might carry it into the world outside of church and family. We know that the *Zeitgeist* has changed over the years, and the sense that truth is absolute is not common in secular society (or perhaps in the church). It can be downright unhealthy to one's career, friendships, or social standing to voice Christian ideas. To say that one would like to help others come to Christ is often considered a form of Christian proselytization or colonialization. This has led many to bifurcate their Christian experience, talking and acting one way at church (and at home) but a different way everywhere else. We have become a culture where faith is nurtured only in two places—at church (or explicitly Christian schools) or at home. This is not ideal. We want character to transcend situations as much as possible.

One way to do this is to talk about virtues. Christian virtues are often also secular virtues. This is true with forgiveness. Forgiving is a human virtue, not a specifically Christian one. To forgive is part of the common grace, like to love, to be self-controlled, to be just. So, having a campaign for forgiveness at the church gives people the opportunity to discuss at work or in the clubhouse or in the local watering hole something that is at once Christian and secular, avoiding the bifurcation that often occurs. This helps the people in your congregation bring their faith into the places other than family and church where they live. This provides a way that the church can minister in the public square, and at the same time it provides a way that people—even those who don't consider themselves Christian—can be invited to church.

### Consider Costs

It is costly to organize a sermon series. It requires your time, energy, and commitment, especially if you have not preached often on a topic and are faced with numerous new preparations. It is also costly to instigate changes within the church, like new Sunday School classes, programs for youth (e.g., children, early adolescents, late adolescents) or young adults (college age or emerging professionals or entry-level jobs). It is costly to locate, recruit, and

train leaders, and to supervise them (or assure their supervision). However, some training is necessary if the lay leaders are to be effective. It is costly to find curricula, books, or movies that you trust.

### **Consider Chances of Success**

When we get excited about a new program, we almost always feel that the program will be a smashing success. This is human nature. Cognitive science tells us, however, that virtually all of us are—over the long-run—really lousy at predicting the future. We might hit a fantastic prediction correctly sometimes, and those are usually easy to recall. But we tend to forget or explain away all of those failed predictions. In cognitive psychology, this is called the over-confidence fallacy.

So, if we aren't good at predicting the future, how do we judge the likelihood of success? We rely on base rates. Base rates are averages across many people of how they respond to a program. A good base rate is sometimes hard to come by. "Experts" are not always right, especially when they predict the future. But they are usually right when estimating the rate at which outcomes occur. Also, scientific studies provide another look at base rates. Scientific studies of how people respond to forgiveness groups, for example, show us the rate at which people in the groups forgive. The leaders are almost always really positive, optimistic, and confident. But how do people respond? Fortunately, the base rate of responding to forgiveness interventions—whether psychoeducational groups, do-it-yourself workbooks, online exercises, discussion groups, book groups, or whatever—is well established. The longer people invest in thinking about and trying to practice forgiveness, the more forgiving they become. So, if you preach one sermon on forgiveness, you can expect a small response in change in actual forgiving, but if you preach a five-week series, you literally will get five times the response in actual forgiving. If people also are in an eight-week Sunday School group, they will have four times the effect of two weeks of discussing forgiveness in Sunday School.

What really is "success" in a forgiveness group, forgiveness sermon series, or forgiveness book club? Will participants become completely and infallibly forgiving? No, we know too much about fallen human nature to expect that. But will they become better at forgiving? Will their character come to approximate the "mind of Christ" through the Christian formation of working toward forgiveness? Will they "put on" forgiveness more often and "put off" resentment and grudge-holding more often? Will some of the short-term problems that you see as you assess the people in your congregation—relational conflict, hurts, bitterness, and dissatisfaction—be lessened?

### **Consider Potential Roadblocks**

Consider what might hold you back from entering a costly (in terms of time and effort) decision to prioritize forgiveness in your preaching and teaching. Usually, it is familiarity with the way things are now, uncertainty about changes you might provoke, and worry or concern over what might be lost (i.e., the opportunity costs) in trying to instigate change. Are there other roadblocks preventing you from promoting forgiveness? There are many legitimate roadblocks—such as already having committed to some other important emphases. But sometimes, unfortunately, we all succumb to the easy way of status quo.

### **Four Big Reasons to Forgive**

There are numerous reasons to forgive that make sense to us intuitively, but also that have been shown to be true from (1) theological reflection or (2) from scientific studies.

1. Theology is clear about the need to forgive (see Matt 6:12, 14-5).
2. Science has demonstrated clearly that there are health costs to being unforgiving frequently. Loren Toussaint, myself, and David Williams edited a book in 2015, *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health*, in which 17 independent research teams reviewed the research studies in different areas of health and mental health to show that forgiveness was related to better physical and mental health.
3. Science has also demonstrated clearly that relationships are better when people forgive.
4. Scientific studies have also shown that spirituality (one's degree of closeness to God) and religion (beliefs, values, and practices of a community of similar-minded and committed people), measured in terms of religious commitment, both are related to forgiveness.

## Sermons From the Faculty

### A Sermon by

**The Rev. Whitney Z. Edwards**  
**St. Christopher's School Richmond, Virginia.**

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

Sometimes, when I am out in the world, doing the endless chores of adulthood and trying my best to stay present to and delight in the simplicity of the mundane: shaking water off broccoli, scrubbing filth off my car, shopping replacement water heaters at Lowes, I look around at other people doing the same such adulting tasks and wonder, how many of these folks, right now in the grocery, at the shell station, at this big box store, are dreaming about Jesus.

Just pushing their carts, loving him.

Hands resting at 10 and 2 wondering about the taste of living water.

Staring past the check-out line dreaming of the kingdom come. And you know, all I need is 2 or 3. 2 or 3 people who *look* like they just might be with me in daydreaming about the Lord we love and the loneliness is gone. Because *then* I know I am not alone, my people are here! Well, winner winner chicken dinner! Look at all ya'll!

Look all these Jesus loving people. It's so good to be with folks like you; people who think going to church several times a day is a good thing, who actively wish English had an aorist tense to its verbs so we could cut to the chase when discussing God's kingdom come ("cause the whole "already and not yet" thing sounds nice but it sure is a mouthful), who would give their lives a dozen times over in the hopes that they might just once catch a glimpse of Jesus in those whom they have served. Yes ma'am, it is good to be with my people.

You know, I've got to say it. Some people think we are a strange group. And when they come asking what we are all about, it's all too easy to get in the weeds explaining to others what we are about. We find ourselves saying things like "Well, actually, as a matter of fact, I really like Muslims, a lot of us do." And "yeah, the Trinity is not three *different* Gods but more like three persons in one substance, does that make sense?!" Or "no, actually, it's not that I am "like" a priest. I am a priest...yup AND I can have children, and I don't really want to go there with you..." We are a strange bunch, clearly, because we get all kinds of strange questions.

So, as you and I will soon leave the protective safety of this Episcopal preaching camp and go out into a world that doesn't know what to make of us, however anyone else might summarize what it means to be a Christian, I am

here to tell you that you can do so with one verb: to love. THAT is central reason for our being. It is the foundation of creation, it is the first and greatest commandment. It is why we do what we do. Every story about Jesus, his words, actions and responses, to friend and foe, even his response to the cross itself, are illustrations of this, which is the only acceptable response to life. Jesus is not vague on this one, ya'll. Our Lord, our Savior, the foundation stone of this church says respond to it all with great LOVE.

In his infancy, Jesus would have heard his father and mother intoning a prayer of love as they woke every morning. Every night, he heard them saying it as they went to sleep. As soon as he could speak, Jesus would have said the same prayer of love every morning and every night of his entire illustrious life. The door frame of his home, and every single home of every single one of his neighbors for that matter, had the prayer of love written on it. An innocent man convicted to die at the hands of a corrupt religious and political system and he woke the morning of his execution proclaiming *love* to God and neighbor upon his lips. Amazing. This most famous prayer is referred to in Hebrew as The Shema: which in part reads "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6).

So naturally, by the time he was an adult and teacher and asked what is the core command of their tradition, the answer was immediate to his lips, Jesus replied: "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, then adding to it a portion of Leviticus saying "AND you shall Love your neighbor as yourself." That is it, children. "Do this and you shall live." That is what we are about. It is our inheritance. Our faith.

Early in ministry, I was drawn to know those who did not know such love and was led to our jails and prisons. And I was fortunate to spend seven years ministering to men, women and children across the spectrum from jails to death row. One of the first things I discovered in prison is that these folks are not as they are depicted on tv and in film. The vast majority are non-violent. Most keep their heads down, do their time, trying to figure out how to get clean, and how to make a life when they get out. Another is that at the root of the pain caused and known by offenders lies a profound deprivation of Love: the truly good, nurturing, accepting love, from people close to them yes, but especially from the wider community. By a chance of birth, great injustice, a heavy dose of poverty, and a liberal drenched in addiction many have seen so much pain that it had choked their love for themselves, for each other, and for God. And it was out of that poisoned soil so much of their understanding of what is necessary for survival has grown.

For those of us who have long had the Shema written on our hearts in baptism, who have had the fortune of knowing someone, even nominally, who embodied God's love, it is easy to forget that one cannot write the Shema on their own heart. *It must be written there for us. To love we must be loved.*

Now, several years into this awesome ministry, the most amazing thing happened. As background to this event, you should know that I was orphaned as a child. And when asked, I say my mother died of a heart attack. But the truer story was that she lost her life's savings to an old family friend who was an attorney and thief tasked with managing her estate after she lost my dad to pneumonia. The stress and struggle of never recovering any of it tragically killed her.

So years and years later, I was about to begin a prison Chapel services, when I heard a voice from among the inmates that stopped me in my tracks. I hadn't seen the man for at least 10 years, and didn't even know he was locked up, but I knew that voice immediately. I remember muttering to my assistant, "of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, he walks into mine!"

Thankfully he didn't recognize me or know my name, because everyone just called me "Chaplain". So as he shook my hand and took a prayer book from me, I got to feel all the feelings one feels when looking at the person to blame for a loved one's death. I didn't say a word, it was all just too much. Turns out ministering to one's own offender is a different experience than ministering to someone else's!

Apparently, he had acted as an attorney for the State of VA and the Commonwealth had not been as easy to steal from as my mother so he had real time ahead of him. Week after week, I let him come back to the chapel while maintaining my anonymity, giving myself the time I needed to think about him, his crime, mom's suffering, my loss, and this love I had professed with our lips but was now being called to live with my life.

Finally, I introduced myself to my offender. Trembling, "I said I am Whitney Edwards. You knew my mother, Karen (oh the look in his eyes at that moment) ... I continued: "you and I have a history out there (as I gestured to the high prison fencing), but in here we share a God of healing love. Now to be clear, the love which binds us does not give you the privilege to harm me anymore than you already have nor I to punish you more than you have already been. So you are welcome in this space. If you betray the trust I have offered, the terms will change, but that's your choice. Until then, (and I paused on this one) I will call you my brother and you may call me sister. Do you understand?" Surprised he simply said, "Thank You".

For months after, we worshiped together, side-by-side. We prayed the confession, tore bread and poured grape juice for each other and touched in the intimacy of passing the peace. We lived, as best anyone can in such circumstances, in Christian community patterned according to the ancients. We were community but we were not friends. He never ask my forgiveness for

what he had done (I am not sure he is capable of such a thing). And he didn't seem to care to receive it, anyway. But over those months of standing at his side and praying for him, I came to better understand the depth of the misery which he had known. I did not feel sorry for him, I felt compassion for a fellow human being's suffering and it changed me. Forgiveness came over me, not with the suddenness of a decision but gradually, like a scale slowly tipping under the weight of granules of love being poured upon it. I've never liked the man, but I have come to love him.

Friends, I didn't share this story to highlight Jesus's command that we respond to the world with Love because I think it sounds nice. I tell you because I can testify to the fact that it is the *only* way we will get through this life with our heart, and soul, and strength intact. Though we can respond to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune otherwise, the cost is just too great.

The truth is, those places of conflict and discord, the people in our lives and families and our world who cause us heartache, we may have the impulse to harm them with a sharp word or action, but it is love that will disarm them. We will LOVE them more. Not by thinking ourselves superior to them, or making ourselves needlessly vulnerable to them, but in praying for them and studying the scriptures and acting out of the wise love we have devoted ourselves to embody. Not foolish or false love, Wise love:

-The same love Jesus spoke in prayer morning and night.

The same love for which the disciples dropped their nets.

-The same love you have said or will say "Yes" to in ordination, and every day after in which you serve the living God.

-The love of the Shema, our ancestors. Love which does not write itself on our hearts. We bear the pen for each other.

Love is the sacred balm for the wounds of this hurting world. I am no less convicted of this here in these idyllic bend of the old James River, than in an isolation cell in the state penitentiary.

Brothers and sisters, we are not the creators of love, we are simply inheritors of it. Our Lord invites, begs, pleads that we apply this LOVE to our beloved parishioners as well as our most egregious offenders. In so doing we live out our sacred purposes and reinforce this strange awesome, holy, and sacred body we are, the body of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## Waiting for Sightings of Glory

**The Rev. Susan Ironside**  
**St. John on the Mountain, Bernardsville, New Jersey**

John 17:20-26

*[Jesus prayed,] Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me,  
may be with me where I am, to see my glory,  
which you have given me because you loved me  
before the foundation of the world.*

Are you sick of sermons yet? I kind of am. And I love preaching almost more than any other part of being a priest. We have heard one amazing sermon after another in chapel and in preaching groups, and I have loved it. And I love PEP. I truly do! But it's Thursday evening. We have feasted on some of the richest of homiletical meals for so many days in a row. We heard Bishop Curry, for heaven's sake! Most of us will spend the rest of our lives wishing we could have just one preaching moment that our Presiding Bishop seems to enjoy every time he steps in front of God's people. It's been like a week of eating foie gras and Belgian chocolate at every meal. So maybe tonight the very thought of a rich meal makes you crave a diet coke and a grilled cheese.

And here is a really shameful secret: I am kind of sick of Eastertide as well. Which is blasphemy and I know it. I am the only preacher in my parish, and the past several weeks the assembly has been stuck with just listening to plain old me as we push ahead and through the weeks of Easter in the Eucharistic lectionary.

I am bored with Paul's travels in the Acts of the Apostles. He is always provoking the wrong people getting run out of town. And if Jesus doesn't land the plane of his High Priestly Prayer in John soon, I may consider converting to one of our sister Christian traditions where you can preach whatever you want and ignore the lectionary.

"I in you, and them in me," Jesus prays. At length, he prays this. We get it. Jesus. You want us all to be together. Nesting dolls, or something. Jesus packed neatly inside of God, and us nestled neatly inside of Jesus.

It's a long prayer, and I'm not good at long prayer. I have probably made many a Spiritual Director reach for the bourbon because of my failures in prayer. And here's a pro-tip: good luck preaching on that part of John. You will learn to dread long stretches of Johannine readings, with the "Bread of Life" Summer being the August when you should consider taking your vacation and letting the supply priest preach on that three weeks in a row.

So since tonight I don't feel very accomplished at prayer, and I feel even less compelled to preach a brilliant sermon, I will tell you a story. It's

what I do for my kids when I run out of ideas or energy. I tell them a favorite story.

In those days, you could walk much closer to the gate of the airport, and there was more to see because there were fewer security checkpoints. She waited outside a sliding door, this woman, her family standing around her, watching the doors slide open and then shut. They had been waiting a long time, this family. In the airport, they had been waiting a couple of hours. Before that, years.

How can this be? —the woman thought, standing in a crowded airport. How can this be? —that on several tons of steel powered by massive engines, a machine that so elegantly had sliced through the sky for over 12 hours now, crossing the vast ocean, and carrying a few hundred strangers, how can it be that inside of all that rested one small, vulnerable, mysterious person, the most delicate cargo that this woman could even imagine.

The flight had taken off from Seoul, Korea the day before, and had made a brief stop in Hong Kong. The blue screen in New York said it was “On Time.” Whatever that meant. Because she had lost track of time.

How can this be? —she thought, standing in this packed place of people rushing to get home from college; business travelers in suits walking quickly to catch a connecting flight, families with cranky children, hoping that the wait wouldn’t be too much longer, that the flight would arrive, or board, soon. Announcements over the loudspeaker. The woman heard and saw none of that. Her eyes were strained only for one sight, watching the doors marked International Arrivals slide open and then shut.

How can this be? —the woman thought. How can this be that she could be a mother? —she wondered. Because she was barren.

She knew so little, almost nothing, about the one who was coming. She knew only that she longed for him, had spent years waiting for him, and was waiting still, in these moments before his plane landed, watching the doors slide open and shut.

She had come from a long line of people who desired something they didn’t fully understand. She was actually one of the people Jesus had been praying for when he prayed his marathon prayer that no one wants to preach about because it’s too holy and complicated of a prayer. Jesus had prayed that the glory that had been revealed to him would one day be revealed to those beloved people who nestled inside of Jesus, as Jesus was enfolded in God’s own self. Jesus had prayed that those people whom God had given to Jesus would see Jesus’ own glory, glory that God had given Jesus simply because God loved him from before the foundation of the world.

Before the foundation of the world. That’s a long time to love. When you love as long as God has loved Jesus, glory comes leaking out along the way, as the centuries roll by. But sometimes you have to wait for stretches of time to get a glimpse of it.

So this woman was waiting for her sighting of glory, her feet planted on the floor of the airport, her eyes straining for glory. She didn't even really understand what that meant, exactly, but she knew she desired it. And she was prepared to wait for it.

You know what that is like. Her waiting was not all that unique. You all have waited for years for sightings of glory. Waiting for the stole around your neck maybe, or the bishop's hands on your head, or your hands on broken bread. Wondering as you wait, "How can this be?" Will the stole feel enfolding or strangling? Will the bishop hands strengthen or intimate? Is Bread fragile when you break it, or is it really hard to crack open? That's probably part of what brought you to Virginia on your only week off this summer.

You have waited through meetings and interviews and seminary. And that's just in your priestly vocation. In your baptismal vocation and in your real life, you have probably waited through things I can't even imagine. And you are waiting still. Trusting that Jesus was praying for you that night too, when Jesus prayed that others would behold glory.

That's what this woman was doing in the airport that day, as she watched the doors slide open and then shut. She was waiting to behold glory. The end of her longing, she knew, was resting in the lap of a stranger. The object of her desire had black silky hair, jet-ink colored eyes, and cocoa beige skin that was unlike her own. She knew almost nothing about him. Only that she loved him. And she needed him. A thousand sermons couldn't capture what she most desired—and she knows this because she would one day try to write them—because she couldn't explain it.

On that day in the airport she knew nothing about the days and years ahead. About the nights when she would be sick with worry about him. Or the inadequacy and frustration that would come bubbling to the surface in moments when she knew she wasn't very good at this thing she had spent so many years desiring. Or the ways she would have to learn to forgive or the many things for which she would need forgiveness. Or the moments that were so beautiful that she would lose her breath in wonder.

On that day she knew none of that.

She just waited.

Watching the doors slide open and then shut.

Standing in a long line with the God who has been waiting and loving since before the foundation of the world.

Waiting for glory to be revealed.

Just as Jesus had prayed it would.

**The Rev. Dr. Jackson  
Seminary of the Southwest**

I was raised in the Church. Seriously. Baptized as an infant. Brought to Church as a child. Confirmed as a teenager. Heck, I even went to Church while I was in college. And now I'm a priest. Which you might think was an entirely good thing, except for this... I don't have any idea what it would be like to be without Jesus. Probably some of you in this room, those who came to faith later in your life, or who went through a period of doubt and unbelief know what that feels like, and probably some of you are like me. But for me, as a life-long believer, I am a little confused as to why the Church seems so obsessed with saying goodbye to Jesus.

I mean, really. The Disciples could be forgiven for thinking he was really gone on Good Friday, but he came back in three days. That evening he appeared to them through a locked door. A week later he was back. The Gospels are full of these accounts, fish on the beach, and so on. So, I get it why when we remembered Jesus' ascension just a few days ago, they just stood there staring at the sky. I would have too. And when the Angel said "why are you just staring up there?" I'd have been the first one to say, "Don't worry, he'll be right back."

But for more than 2,000 years now, he hasn't returned in the same way they saw him go. And then today, today we are supposed to move on past the Ascension, through Pentecost, and into the long stretch of Ordinary Time. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to move on. Not this year, nor any year. I still want to know what happened to Jesus. Where did he go and when will he be back? Anybody else with me?

If you are, I have some hard news for us. That's not at all the right question. Not even close. The Church is right to move on, and we should just get on the train, because here's the truth: Jesus ascended into Heaven, and sent us the Holy Spirit, but he also left us another gift... the Church itself, to shelter us and to challenge us. To keep us safe, and to help us grow.

Sometimes it doesn't seem like all that great a gift, when you get right down to it. The Church can be kind of a mess. But it is a gift, and this week, some of the best parts of the Church have come right here to Roslyn, to participate in the Preaching Excellence Program. And I'm not even talking about the faculty. They're great, of course, and you'll get to meet them in a few minutes, and come to know them over the course of this week. Actually, I'm talking about you all. You, the participants in this amazing week will not only learn from the faculty, especially Dr. Worthington, but you will also teach each other. That's what it means to be part of a community like this one

**“The Syrophenician Woman”**

**The Rev. Nikki Mathis**  
**St. Peter's Church, Atlanta, Georgia**

This gospel is perfect for a throw-back Thursday, because it brings to my mind the words of the incomparable and highly esteemed theologian, Queen Latifah. Now she may not seem like a theologian because as the star of that more than 30-year-old sitcom *Living Single*, and as a hip hop force of nature from the 90's, she doesn't appear to say much about God. But in her 1993 Grammy award winning single, *U.N.I.T.Y.*, she says what the woman in our gospel story has to be thinking... "Who you callin' a bitch?"

For most of us, It's a shock to hear that ugly a word in this holy a space, but I'm going to ask you to take that shock, and imagine how it might desecrate the holy space of your mind, spirit, and body of you were called by, entirely defined by, and the dignity of your being limited by that ugly word.

And this is where y'all would have to pray for me, because if Jesus were to stand up here and call me that name, in spite of how I love Jesus, in spite of how much I was taught in my cemetery classes, I mean seminary classes, in spite of what my grandma showed me about God's goodness, I would not be able to help myself... I would begin to speak in tongues that need no interpretation.

And here's why I would have such a problem. The word Jesus used, in the original language, in the cultural context of this morning's story, was a very common ethnic slur referencing the gender regarded as inferior and the species known as canine. When he first responds to the request of this Syrophenician woman begging for the healing of her daughter, what he actually says is...

"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to... y'all little bitches."

That word, that phrase, was just one more hit in the already abused and vulnerable spaces of her racial identity and femininity. And yet she forgave.

How did she do that? We don't know—scripture doesn't address say. Why did Jesus perfect man and fully God, say what he said? We don't know—scripture doesn't say.

And even though we don't know the 'why,' I believe we're being shown the 'what.' The 'what' is what is possible in the kingdom, in the commonwealth of God, when there is division and disagreement in the room. And make no mistake, even in the kingdom, there is division and disagreement in the room. And still, the 'what' is what forgiveness does when it encounters that division and disagreement in the room.

I believe it is through forgiveness, that this woman is able to stay

engaged in calm, reasoned conversation with Jesus, on the terms Jesus sets. Remember, she says,

(now, be aware that this is the Nikki version of the Bible)—“Jesus, you want to talk about dogs, let’s talk about dogs. Even if I am what you say I am, dogs still get crumbs, and if crumbs are all you have for me today, I will take that.”

And because forgiveness opened the door, Jesus walks through it and takes the journey to meet her where the argument takes them, so that he is then able to say, “you’re right, sis, you got it—your baby girl is healed.”

And here is why I think the notion of crumbs is extremely relevant. Here’s why I think that for Jesus, in this conversation, there was a journey. It’s all because of the backstory we don’t hear in this morning’s gospel.

Just one chapter before this one, Jesus caters lunch for 5,000, his cousin is murdered, and he has to escape an angry mob that wants to push him off a cliff when he preached a sermon they didn’t like. (Next to this, preaching group doesn’t sound so bad now, does it?)

And we’ve got to remember, this is God with skin on; not only fully divine, but fully human, and this human is at this moment exhausted, exasperated and persecuted (much like one feels in seminary). So, of course he wants to get away. And get away he does, when he goes to the region of Tyre. It’s where he decides to try and lay low at a house in the middle of nowhere, hoping he sees nobody, so he can finally be allowed to do nothing...at least for a little bit. It’s no wonder that when he sees this woman entering his space, he says, ‘Sis, please!’

Not only is she in the way of his rest, she’s not a man, and the social convention of the time dictates that the man in the family ask for help, not her. Also, Jesus is very clear that God’s covenant with Abraham specifies that it’s through his people, the children of Israel, that all the families of the world will be blessed, it’s to His own people he should minister. He owes nothing to this Syrophenician somebody who has the nerve to think she should get some too.

So when Jesus calls her that horrible name, he is letting her know just how wrong she is, not only in her actions, but even in her existence, in her very Being, a very clear message that she is ‘less than.’ That’s what an ethnic slur is, a denigration of someone’s being. And what’s interesting to me is that, in this mother’s desperation for the life of her daughter, the issue, the disagreement isn’t ever about the slur....

Her argument is ‘Listen sir, I don’t care what you call me, as long as you call me the-mother-of-a-healed-child, so dog I shall be. I’ll not only *give* you that, I’ll *forgive* you that... please just do what I’m asking you to do.’ Because even though the words have to hurt and the answer has to disappoint, she still sees beyond what he just said to all that He is, a very weary human being who is also every bit the Son of God, even though all he has now is crumbs.

That's actually what it is oftentimes, to be on the margins, to live in covert and overt apartheid. It's to have to choose, sometimes on a daily basis, forgiveness of the socially sanctioned use of words and politically sanctioned use of power that allows for everything from the deportation of dreamers, to the burning of mosques and synagogues, to the killing of little black children playing in a park, and *still* be able to see not only the transgressors humanity, but maybe even the divinity in whose image that human is made. And in that one act that is forgiveness, what is then created is space for disagreement, and a real chance for real discussion, and then...maybe, possibly a path to conversion, an end to division through the honoring of difference. What is then made available is a changed mind and an open heart.

That's part of the 'what' that is so beautiful in the kingdom;

...the fact that wrong action, by itself, can never remove us from the community of the kingdom. We can't be removed because the kingdom operates all on love; especially love expressed as forgiveness. That's what Jesus is showing to us, when in his humanity he messes up and in his divinity, he 'savior's' up, for the first time, truly seeing this woman and hearing this woman, after she first sees and hears him. Only then does he allow that this nameless, only labelled woman, is faithful, and only then does he move in that knowledge to make her, indeed, the mother of a healed child.

That's what it is for you and me to depend on God's living goodness around us and resurrection power in us, to make real the relationships between us. That's what it is to walk through the open door, to enter into the sacred space that forgiveness makes inside the kingdom, and be changed.

**Sermon by**

**The Very Rev. W. (Will) H. Mebane, Jr.**  
**Interim Dean, St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, Buffalo, New York**  
 Ezekiel 4:1-7(17); Luke 9:51-62

Of the 48 chapters believed to have been authored by the prophet Ezekiel, only portions of 7 chapters are assigned for Sundays and other feast days. Those selections that are chosen for the Revised Common Lectionary are very short...consisting of only a few verses. Perhaps that is because Ezekiel is described as “the oddest of the prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

Ezekiel was both prophet and priest – two roles that might be considered contradictory; given that a priest of Israel was devoted to promoting purity and holiness, something clearly not the case with the Lord telling Ezekiel, “I will let you have cow’s dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread.” (Ezekiel 4:15) The role of the prophet, on the other hand, was to preach about righteousness and religious propriety;<sup>2</sup> something to which Ezekiel was clearly dedicated.

Regardless, Ezekiel was considered “one of ancient Israel’s most vigorous religious thinkers. Before Ezekiel was commissioned as a prophet, he had been taken into exile, along with other prominent Judahites, who consulted him on a regular basis.”<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel pronounced what can only be considered harsh words of judgment on the Israelites for their apostasy, which resulted in their being taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of his prophetic mission is clearly articulated in the commissioning of Ezekiel. Listen to these few words from the second chapter of the book of prophecy:

“I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them...do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words...the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead...then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God’; whether they hear or refuse to hear.” (Ezekiel 2:1-7)

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<sup>1</sup> Who’s Who in the Bible, Peter Calvocoressi, “Ezekiel,” Penquin Books, 1987, 71

<sup>2</sup> HarperCollins, Study Bible, David L. Petersen, Ezekiel Introduction, NRSV, 1222

<sup>3</sup> HarperCollins, Petersen

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

One would have to search long and hard to find even a scintilla of compassion among those words. More consoling words will eventually be found as Ezekiel empathizes with the remnant of those exiled. Ezekiel could “put himself in the shoes” of those against which he was charged to prophesy. He ultimately became an intercessor for some of the Israelites that had been taken into exile.

Ezekiel’s compassion is evident in the story of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego who were promoted by Nebuchadnezzar to be in-charge of Babylon. These three friends of another prophet, named Daniel, were thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar because they refused to salute the golden stature whenever the king’s national anthem was played. [Sound vaguely familiar to our modern times?] According to Jewish midrash,

Ezekiel is the one that prayed to G\_D to spare the three young men from the fiery furnace.<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel empathized with this remnant of Israel and, according to midrash, appealed out of altruism on behalf of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego.

The Valley of the Dry Bones is perhaps the ultimate illustration of empathy by Ezekiel. There he appeals for reconciliation between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel

There is no such evidence of reconciliation among those traveling with Jesus through the Samaritan Village. The disciples James and John exhibit no compassion.

It’s worth being reminded of what has preceded their visit. We read in the verses preceding this evening’s assigned text about John complaining to Jesus that “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us.” (Luke 9:49)

Just before that is the story among the disciples that, “An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.” (Luke 9:46)

Earlier, Jesus is chastising the disciples for not being able to heal the boy with a Demon. In the Gospel of Mark, “When [Jesus] had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’” (Mark 9:28 f)

Finally, Luke reports how James and John had been with Peter when Jesus was transfigured while praying on the mountain. They had been terrified and “kept silent and...told no one any of the things” (Luke 9:36) that they had witnessed on the mountain.

Yet, after all of that; the transfiguration; being rebuked by Jesus for arguing about which of them was the greatest; failing to heal the Demon

because they weren't praying; and, being admonished for wanting to stop someone from ministering in Jesus' name, James and John now want to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" (Luke 9:54) the Samaritans in the village.

James, John, and the other disciples did not seem to have learned anything about compassion or empathy from their experiences with Jesus. There are no signs of humility among them. There is no request for forgiveness of their arrogance and insolence. The disciples are still too self-focused. They are like those other "would be followers of Jesus" who prioritize matters like personal business over taking-up whatever cross they have and following Jesus.

Jesus leads his disciples into a Samaritan Village; knowing that there is deep enmity among Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans. His intent is to promote forgiveness and healing. He's no doubt hoping that his disciples – who Jesus is preparing for their mission of reconciliation once he is no longer physically with them – will choose reconciliation over retaliation. Their response to rejection by the Samaritan Village confirms that Jesus still has much work to do among his disciples before they are ready for forgiveness and reconciliation.

It's a reminder of the work Jesus still must do with us as well.

Amen.

## “On Forgiveness”

**The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith**  
St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church, Dublin, Ohio  
Matthew 18:21-35, and Genesis 50:15-21

One of my favorite theologians, Eddie Izzard, has some rather creative insights into the Anglican Church. He points out that most people do not realize the Anglican Church provides the opportunity for private confession. Not many people take advantage of it, but it is offered.

He says that if you go to an Anglican priest and say, “Father, I have done very many bad things,” the priest is likely to reply, “Well, so have I.”

Actually, that’s very good theology when you think about it.

We have all done very many bad things. And, if we have lived long enough, then bad things have been done to us. At this point it makes me want to add that line from the confession in the 1928 prayer book, “And there is no health in us.”

We have done very many bad things, and bad things have been done to us, and there is no health in us. And so Jesus commands us to forgive; a lot.

Years ago, probably 25 years ago, I was preaching on this lesson and it made me wonder if it is always a good idea to forgive. You see, I was working with a parishioner who was going through a marital separation in the midst of horrible abuse. I was helping her get the resources she needed, and to make sure she was safe. Was she supposed to forgive? At this point, I thought, it might actually be dangerous to do so.

Then I remembered the story of Joseph. Joseph forgave his brothers, but it was not until he was in a position of power. In fact, he was the number two man in Egypt, and could have summoned the whole Egyptian army if he needed. Even still Joseph had to test his brothers’ integrity before finally forgiving them. He forgave from a position of strength. In addition, I realized that even in Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant, the forgiveness flows from the more powerful to the less powerful.

So, in my sermon, I said that yes Jesus wants us to forgive, but we need to do so from a position of strength. I shared the story of Joseph, and also used that same illustration from the movie *The Mission* that Dr. Worthington described in his opening plenary. The slave trader, played by Robert DeNiro, could not be forgiven until a tribesman of the people he enslaved held a knife to his neck. Only when the power differential was shifted could true forgiveness be offered.

After that sermon, I kid you not, five people called me to ask for an appointment. They all wanted to talk about forgiveness. How do you do it?

What does it mean to be in a position of strength and how do you get there?

And Dr. Worthington said that just one sermon on forgiveness probably won't have much impact. I am here to tell you it can.

But I was just a young priest who simply came to a new realization about forgiveness, and shared it in a sermon. I was not prepared for the reaction. I did not have a plan. I did not have a REACH forgiveness program. So I asked for help from peers, and I promised these people I would walk with them through this journey; that I would learn as much as I could to help them. I referred a couple people to professional counseling. I worked with one person to help her forgive her long-dead father. And I served as a mediator when two people sat down to reconcile with each other and live into forgiveness.

I learned a lot. I learned that forgiveness is hard work. But it is necessary work. Because, after all, we have done very many bad things, and bad things have been done to us, and there is no health in us. Without forgiveness we are just a mess.

We've heard this week that unforgiveness is actually an emotional state; a toxic, self-destructive emotional state. But I have observed that unforgiveness is also an actual, physical reality.

A friend sent me a link to a YouTube video that showed a drone (not the military kind) flying through the streets of Homs, Syria. This once thriving city has been reduced to rubble. No windows remain in the buildings. Rubble clogs the streets. Whole walls are missing from buildings. The place seems uninhabited, and essentially uninhabitable. This is what unforgiveness looks like.

It also looks like 90 dead and more than 300 injured in a bombing this week in Afghanistan. It looks like young girls blown up at a concert in Manchester; and like an angry man abusing two women on a train in Portland, just because one is wearing a hijab, and then when three men step in to confront this bully they are stabbed and two of them die.

Unforgiveness sounds like the buzz of drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen (and yes military drones have a distinctive buzz that you will never forget). And when people hear that buzz they know someone will die, and it may not be just the terrorists.

Unforgiveness looks and feels like the absolute contempt we have for one another in our political process.

And quietly it looks like the sweet and wonderful kids in my church youth group, who live in the isolated bubble of Dublin, Ohio without ever realizing the pain and suffering others go through for their prosperity and their safety.

We have done very many bad things, and bad things have been done to us, and there is no health in us. We need forgiveness: to give, and to receive.

It is so hard. And we often fail.

Joseph offers another hope. When he reaffirms his forgiveness to his brothers he says to them, “What you did to me, you intended for evil. But God turned it to good.” Here we are at the very end of the book of Genesis and we hear the word, “good.” I am sure you all remember how that word is used at the beginning of Genesis. God creates and calls everything, “good.” It’s all good. So the word good serves as a set of bookends at the opening and closing of the book of Genesis.

God creates everything as good, and then human beings spend the rest of the book of Genesis mucking everything up. Cain kills Abel. God gets so frustrated with evil that he destroys everyone in a flood, except Noah and his family. The people build the tower of Babel.

God calls Abraham, and he seems like a good guy, but he argues with God about everything. When am I going to have a kid? What about Sodom and Gomorrah? Will you really destroy it even if there are a few good people there?

And then when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, suddenly he stops arguing? Really?

Then you’ve got the dysfunctional family intrigue of Rebekah, Jacob and Esau. And let’s face it, Jacob is just a jerk. There is very little, ever, to commend about Jacob’s behavior.

Jacob’s sons are not much better. Even before they sell Joseph into slavery there is the story of Shechem. The prince of Shechem wanted to marry Jacob’s daughter Dinah, but the brothers say they cannot marry their sister off to some uncircumcised man. So they get the prince to order that every male in Shechem get circumcised, and as they are recovering the brothers swoop down on the city and kill everyone. They commit genocide and dishonor their sister and their father.

We have done very many bad things. Bad things have been done to us, and there is no health in us.

But here at the end of Genesis, Joseph says that even in the midst of all of this horror, God has worked some good, to keep many people alive. Maybe that’s the hope in forgiveness, that when we forgive we open the door to God working in and through us, that even in midst of all the evil we do to another, God may find a way to work some good.

## “Indeed, You Can Save France, and Still be Burned at the Stake”:

**The Rev. Kate Spelman**

**All Saints Episcopal Church, Western Springs, Illinois**

Matthew ~~12:25-30~~ 13:1-23<sup>1</sup>, 2 Corinthians 3:1-6;

Propers for the Feast of Joan of Arc<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks ago, I was at a leadership conference with a bunch of Episcopal priests, most of whom had been ordained for some time. But one night over dinner a woman who had only been ordained about a year asked our table one of the perpetual questions of ministry: “How do you keep track of hours? How do you keep the job from taking over your life?”

Now, this is an 18-month cohort program, so I am holding out hope it’ll get better – but at that point we were still very much at the part of the conference that is all about jockeying for position and impressing one another. Not that any of that happens at PEP, of course, but this can be a pretty deadly zone for any clergy gathering. People were *ecstatic* to have an opportunity to “should” all over someone else and tell her how to run her life. They began to share what were some legitimately good suggestions: there is, in fact, an app for that. Then there’s the thing with blocks of time. There’s limiting evening meetings and communicating that early and often. Someone said they had bought a propriety Excel sheet off the internet -- I rolled my eyes at that one.

As I sat there, silently, I began to wonder if anyone was going to be honest with our newbie colleague. I sat there waiting for someone to say what I was thinking. I sat there wondering if anyone would tell her what has been, for me, the number one sanity-saving, time-limiting, boundary-maintaining thing in about six years of this.

Well, no one said it then, but I’ll say it now:

Somedays I suck a little at my job, and I forgive myself for it.

Somedays I’m not just that great a priest, and it turns out that’s ok.

Somedays I’m just a B+ priest, and mostly, no one notices.

Sometimes I walk away from my desk – NOT because the vestry packet is finally typo-free and ready to send out, but because I am ready to send the thing out. Sometimes I walk away from my desk because it’s time to go to the gym; sometimes

no I can’t extend this meeting past the posted end time because it is time to take my dog for a walk. Sometimes I just leave work because it is 5pm and I am done. Sometimes I stop writing a sermon for morning prayer the next morning not because it’s a beautiful finished piece that will impress upon my fellow

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<sup>1</sup> *A mix-up occurred, and a different text than I had prepared to preach on was read in worship. Since this works so well with the theme of the sermon, my text has been amended to reflect this.*

preachers how tremendous a preacher I really am ... but because I was up late the night before, and I need sleep.

Sometimes I suck a little at my job, and I forgive myself for it.

Let me be clear, this is not an invitation to give up, or to underperform. I'd like to think that those of you who are spending Memorial Day weekend at a conference on preaching are probably not terribly likely to fall into that trap. So instead, I offer you a caution not to become that type of overcontrolling, over-functioning priest, who is so set on getting it all exactly right.

Because the sad truth is that in ministry we can never control the outcomes of our work; let alone how people will perceive them in the moment; let alone how people will perceive them a week, a year, a decade, or a century later.

Later in that leadership workshop - we were like a full day in, so I'd already outed myself as the weird one - later, the folks teaching the workshop asked us to name our images of leadership, so we could put them on a whiteboard. And I popped up with "Joan of Arc - ok, but hear me out on this, though." And I would like now like to preach for a bit on Joan of Arc -- ok, but hear me out on this, though.

Joan was the subject of a much better sermon than this one preached at my diaconal ordination, just about six years ago tomorrow - which is why we have read half the propers for her here today. You all probably know the basics of Joan, right? Poor peasant girl who has visions which direct her to lead French forces into battle against the English. A little awkward for an Anglican audience, but I'll get back to that. Anyway, Joan did pretty well - she saved France! - but was ultimately turned over to the English and tried for heresy. She was finally executed for cross-dressing- which I will also get back to - only to posthumously have her trial annulled, her sanity and health wildly speculated upon, and to find herself canonized and appointed protector of France with a couple of other saints.

It's a fascinating story. Trust me, I read the entire Wikipedia article.

I think of Joan not infrequently in parish ministry, because it is yet true today that you can save France and still get burned at the stake.

Jesus knew this too, as we see in the passage we read from Matthew this morning -- which was by the way not the passage of Mathew I was prepared for. But today we read the parable of the sower, which reveals to us that even Jesus could not control the outcome of his preaching. Faithful preachers sow seed far and wide; some of it sprouts, and some of it doesn't. You sow anyway, knowing the outcome is out of your control once the seed leaves your hand. And you know what? I'm glad we ended up reading that scripture. Because none of us can control every little bit of our preaching context, or our preaching outcomes. Jesus couldn't, nor could Joan of Arc.

Indeed, the historical record seems to indicate that Joan spoke extremely well at her trial, far better than her lack of education should have allowed her to speak. It goes to show the truth of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation's premise that good preaching will draw a crowd – but reminds us that if you're not careful the crowd you draw will be an angry mob of English clerics.

See? You can save France, defend the faith amazingly well, and still be burned at the stake.

Don't get me wrong - Sometimes saving France is well worth it. Sometime in your ministry you will be the hero of the day. But you can do everything right, and still suffer for it. You can do everything right and still be accused and tried by a church mad about something entirely different.

Which brings me back, as promised, to the cross-dressing.

It's amazing but that's *actually* what got Joan killed. This is still what it's like to preach while female: you tell people the archangels visited and told you to save France, you witness with courage and passion, and your audience is like, "Yeah girl, but let's talk about your outfit." Or, "Nice sermon, pastor, but where did you get your earrings?"

This is also a great metaphor for some of my worst vestry meetings. We pass a budget's worth of sweeping changes with little discussion, but God forbid we ask for a few hundred dollars to repair the rectory driveway. You never can tell what'll set the English off.

Anyway, those Anglican clergy needed to demonstrate that Joan's claim to have visions was part of a history of heresy and not a one-off, forgivable misunderstanding. And so Joan was tried for wearing men's clothes, which was billed as a grave affront of the natural order of the sexes that God had created.

Once again, remarkably similar to what it's like to preach while female.

As much as I'd love to see her claimed as a gender queer icon, it seems that Joan traveled dressed as a man through France because it was safer not to stand out and attract unwanted attention. While in prison awaiting her ecclesial trial, Joan insisted that wearing a dress made her susceptible to rape by her captors.

I don't want to dwell on the weird gender politics that made asserting and defending her virginity one of the ways Joan claimed her right to prophesy. I do want to mention, but not dwell on, the fact that for some of us this is not metaphorical but literal truth – the incidence of rape and abuse within our churches, within the world at large, is still shocking and unacceptable.

But in a less-literal way, and a very important way indeed, there will be times in your call, even within the church building you serve and preserve when

your safety and the sovereignty you have over your own being will be called into question.

Sometimes saving France is worth going to the stake for, and sometimes your personal safety and the integrity of your personhood can be something worth going to the stake for, too.

Because after all your trials – after defending yourself eloquently, standing firm by decisions that may be unpopular but ultimately necessary, maintaining your integrity – after all that, you still cannot control the outcome. All that can be turned against you.

You may control the effort you put into your work but you cannot control how people will respond. You can do everything right and still be burned at the stake. Hopefully metaphorically, of course, but sometimes even a metaphorical burning, well, burns.

You can save France and still be burned at the stake, and then, even then, it may not be over – you may just come back as a saint a few popes down the line. We cannot control how generations yet unborn will view us!

We can only make the best decisions possible in the time we have with the information we have, hoping that those who come after us will learn to forgive us for sucking at our jobs.

As I hope you will daily learn to forgive yourselves, for sucking at this strange and wonderful calling ever so often. If ever you do, it probably doesn't mean you aren't called to the work. It probably means you had a bad day.

Pastoring is a nothing if not an endless stream of invitations to trust in our own power: church administration (if not the church itself) holds out to us the empty promise that if we can just get *this* immediate task right, control the vote of that committee, spend a few more hours editing the newsletter or refining the sermon, if we can get all the visits done and checked off the list... Then! Then the church budget will balance, the vestry will stop bickering, and we shall all be saved.

And yet the witness of scripture constantly confirms that our competence is not of the letter, or of the newsletter, or of the spreadsheets, or, I'm afraid, even of extremely well-written sermons like this one (which in editing for publication I have much improved). No, our competence is none of that, Paul says in 2 Corinthians: Our competence comes from God. Our competence is measured in relationships that matter; in the making of meaning from the world; and in living lives of integrity, infused with the messy power of the Holy Spirit.

And yeah, there are many times when that's still not good enough for the English.

You might do it all, save France, and still get burned at the stake, condemned as a heretic. And hell, you might suffer all that and then be brought back years later as a saint in the popular imagination.

How deeply annoying it is to realize that while we are called to labor alongside God, we are not actually licensed to do all her work for her. How deeply annoying to realize that we, the alleged dispensers of grace, will spend our lives in a desperate ping pong match between faith and works.

Forgive yourself for missing a volley ever so often. Forgive yourself for going home because you are sick and tired, or just tired, or just ready to go home!

Forgive yourself for sucking at your job ever so often. And? Forgive each other too.

Let us not forget that Joan was condemned by a group of cranky overeducated Anglo clergy with whom I may have more in common than with a poor uneducated French teenager. Let us not be too quick to judge those whose integrity offends us, or is still a work in progress; let us offer one another support in place of condemnation.

Forgive yourselves, and each other, for being quick to judge, for staying silent in the conversation, for letting a fragile ego tempt you to boasting, or an eye roll destroy whatever slim chance there was connect with the boaster.

Forgive yourselves, try to forbear the know-it-all at the table, and tell the truth of your life – for the truth of your life gives permission for others to live and tell their truth as well. Give yourself permission to suck sometimes, and I bet a lot of folks around you will grant you that permission – and be glad to give themselves a bit of it too.

I am glad that Joan has had her successive centuries to be redeemed by the Church – even celebrated by the Anglicans who once condemned her! Her story teaches me that I cannot control the outcome of my work, but that the outcome might be even grander than I can imagine, or that I will see in my lifetime.

And for myself, I am glad that I have another 18 months to learn the grace of forgiveness in that leadership workshop with that particularly cranky group of Anglican priests.

I am grateful to have a lifetime in which I may learn to live with a little more integrity, a lifetime in which I may learn not to be so quick to condemn those who future generations will despise, nor to roll my eyes at those who future generations will revere. They so often turn out to be the same people. And they so often turn out to be people just like me: saint and sinner, martyr and heretic, human and fallible – and all of us in deep need of forgiveness for sucking, even just some of the time.

Amen..

## Sermon by

**The Very Rev. Dr. Sylvia Sweeney**  
**Bloy House, The Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California**

“As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”

Okay, I must admit that as I read this Gospel passage today, for just a moment my mind flashed to an image of Jesus dancing to “Shake It Off” with Taylor Swift. Can you see it? And I have to say that whether you are yourself a Taylor Swift fan or not, I think she and Jesus are on the same page on this one.

For both of them, this passage is about what you do with rejection, with hurt, with insult, and with slander. What do you do when you put it all out there, bare your soul, and give from the deepest places in your heart, only to have what you offered be rejected?

Sometimes it’s in the small things like when you spend all afternoon working on a special dinner for your family or your guests only to hear that they really would have much rather had carry out pizza. Other times it’s a bigger deal. Not getting into the school you applied to. Being looked over and ignored in a job interview because of your skin color or your age or your gender. Getting pulled over by a cop for driving while black. Writing a huge proposal for work that gets thrown in the garbage can before it’s even read. Rejections, big ones and small ones hurt. Some we manage to get over quickly. Others we can’t shake off. Some have the power to haunt us the rest of our lives.

I recently read a book about forgiveness by a forgiveness scientist named Everett Worthington. (And yes, there really is such a thing as a forgiveness scientist.) In the book Worthington talks about the difference between being able to shake it off—and not. He says that unforgiveness sets in in our hearts in those moments when we cannot or feel we dare not let go of what has happened to us. We just keep holding on and reimagining the moment and stewing and fretting, maybe wondering what we could have, should have done differently, and wondering why this person did not understand who we are and what we were trying to say or do. To use Worthington’s term, we ruminate and the more we cook in our own juices of anger, resentment, self-reproach, or hurt: The more we ruminate; the deeper into our bodies, minds, and souls the pain travels, and the harder it becomes to forgive, to let go, and to heal.

Did you notice what Jesus says here? “If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.” What? If I didn’t know better, I’d think that Jesus had never been hurt or rejected in his life, because the last thing I feel in the midst of rejection is peace. But we know that Jesus does know what rejection feels like. He knows what it feels like to be maligned by neighbors and family. He knows what it feels like to be chased out of town; to have an angry mob pursuing you for what you have said. And

Matthew knows this all too well as well. Matthew acknowledges that when Jesus sends the disciples out, (when he sends us out!) we are being sent out like sheep in the midst of wolves.

And knowing this, Jesus still says, .... “let your peace return to you”?  
What peace Jesus? What peace?

Sometimes we encounter people in our lives who seem not to let pain and hurt touch them. They live as if there was no real suffering in the world, no need of forgiveness, no need of healing—as if everyone could have the good life if only they were willing to work hard enough for it or just wait patiently for it to find them. When they tell you to “shake it off” they have no idea what they are asking of you.

But that’s not Jesus. Jesus knew exactly what he was asking; and he had to have known it was possible to ask that of someone only because he had learned for himself that life’s deepest rejections are only healed when we can open our clenched fists and finally, finally... let go of that moment of pain!

So that peace can return to us and all the dirt and crud that’s attached to our hearts, not just our shoes, can be dislodged from within us.

I want you to think for a moment about all the horrible, hurtful nasty things you have witnessed in the last year. I don’t want you to stew on them, but I want you to let them flash through your mind. For some of us they will be cosmic or global. For others, they will be very, very personal and intimate. Think of all the things in our world that need healing, restoring, and forgiving. Think of all those places and people that seem to stand in direct and complete opposition to everything that God has taught us to be. It was in just such a world with all its pain, all its sorrow, and all its rejections that Jesus invited his disciples into a life of forgiveness and peace. Not in any kind of Pollyanna way, as if our hurts could just be tossed aside. No, he said, “when they come, when the hurts come as they inevitably will; find the courage and the resoluteness and the integrity and the faith to...

### **“SHAKE IT OFF!”**

Shake it off, and keep going. Re-find your peace. Plumb the depths of your own capacities to forgive and move on from this awful moment! Spread peace, because that is our only way forward. Let go as soon as you can, as best you can, because on the other side of that town that has rejected you and everything you stand for: there may be another town waiting to greet you with open arms. But you’ll only be ready to go there after you have shaken the dust of this cold hard place off your feet.

“And the players gonna play, play, play, play, play  
And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate  
And I’m just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake  
Shake it off! Shake it off!”

**Select Sermons on Forgiving Delivered  
at the Preaching Excellence Programs I and II in 2017**

**A Sermon By**

**Anna Broadbent**

**Virginia Theological Seminary**

Maundy Thursday – Year A

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

One of the most peaceful sounds in the world is the sound of water. Whether it is rain on the window pane while you're falling asleep, waves lapping the shoreline or even washing dishes. The quiet time of putting your hands in the warm soothing water can be sacred. Water puts us at ease, we find that we can breathe, find a center and connect with God in a way that isn't always accessible to us in this chaotic life.

Water is life giving and life sustaining to everything that we know in this world. Water is often present at the most painful and powerful times in our lives in the form of tears. Tears grace our cheeks during times of joy, pain, fear and confusion. Tears are pivotal for healing – physically, spiritually and emotionally. Tears allow our bodies to release toxic hormones that can be detrimental to our health if they remain. Tears are not always welcome or pleasant, but they are necessary. The tracks tears leave remind us where we've been and whose we are. And tears can help us remain connected to the waters of our baptism. Just last summer, I had the pleasure of holding my nephew over the font at his baptism as his God Mother. As the priest placed the holy waters over his head, once, twice and a third time, some of his baptismal waters ran down my arm and reminded me of my own... tears rushed to my eyes and met the waters of my baptism, even though I was an infant and do not remember my baptism and merged with the waters running down my nephew's head.

Water is central to why we are gathered here today. Today is Maundy Thursday which is where we find our tradition of foot washing. This is the day in which we remember Jesus and his disciples gathered together in the upper room on the night before Jesus was killed. It is also the day we receive our greatest commandment, which is what Maundy means in Latin – command. What is this commandment and what does it have to do with foot washing? The commandment, as outlined in John's Gospel is this: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." In this commandment, we hear a very clear call and commission from Jesus to serve, but when I think of the act of foot washing, I think that Jesus is calling us to serve, but his call is deeper than simple service. It is a call to serve those who have hurt us deeply, those who have let us down,

disappointed us and even betrayed us. These are the people that are in most need of having their feet washed by us and these are the people we need to wash our feet.

Back to our Gospel reading today, Jesus has gathered his disciples for a meal, an ordinary meal, on an ordinary night the day before the extraordinary occurred. Despite the abundance of ordinary present on that night, Jesus' behavior towards his disciples was anything but. Before any meal, it was customary for a servant or a slave to wash the feet of those who were dining. You see, they did not sit up at tables and chairs for meals as we do, they reclined with one another and one certainly does not want to track in the literal crap from outside. The streets were lined with waste filled gutters that had to be trudged through. Rather than have a servant wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus adorned a towel and got down on his knees. He picked up each of the disciples' feet and washed. He touched the dirtiest part of their bodies and wiped them clean. Jesus even washed the feet of Judas; the man whom he knew would betray him the very next day. I wonder... just wonder, if maybe the disciples had tears in their eyes as Jesus gently touched their soles. This, I believe this is an example of the type of behavior that Jesus is referring to when he commands us to love one another.

In this act of love is an act of radical forgiveness. Radical forgiveness and grace is at the heart of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, His death on the cross and God's love for us. Jesus' disciples had their feet washed when they did not deserve it, in fact, as Peter points out, he (and we) should be the ones to be washing Jesus' feet and yet, that is not what Jesus commands of us.

If we are to live into this commandment, we need to learn two things. First, we need to learn how to receive the radical forgiveness that is offered to us in the waters of our baptism, in the waters of the foot washing and in the Eucharist. We need to allow ourselves to be steeped in the forgiveness that is offered to us when we completely do not deserve it. This type of forgiveness is extremely overwhelming when it is offered. This also extends to our relationships with others here on Earth. A few years ago, I was working to reconcile with a dear friend from ages past that I had hurt severely. I had been praying for years for the courage and strength to apologize to her, but I was struggling to find the words. Whenever we talked I just seemed to be stuck in my own guilt and shame of my behavior. One day we were talking on the phone and she just stopped the conversation mid-sentence and said, "Anna, I want you to know that I forgive you and I love you" I immediately began to cry. I tried to tell her that I was desperate to apologize to her and couldn't find the right words to make up for what I had done. I was upset, because I felt like she shouldn't have forgiven me until I had apologized. She listened to me tearfully babble for way too long until she said again, "Anna, I have forgiven you and I love you. Now please be nice to my friend Anna." My tears from this conversation converged with the waters of the forgiveness found in my baptism and met the metaphoric waters that my friend was using to wash away my sins I had been carrying on the soles of my feet. She had forgiven me in the most radical way and I did not deserve her love and forgiveness.

The second thing we need learn to be able to live into Jesus commandment to love one another as he has loved us, is to learn how to extend radical forgiveness to others. Just as we need to learn to sit back and allow Jesus to wash our feet, to watch the crud of sin and the world wash away, we must also learn to grab a towel, take a position of a servant upon our knees and pick up the foot of someone who has wronged us and wash. We must touch the soles of his or her feet. As we gently rinse their feet with warm, comforting water, we must extend radical forgiveness. We must extend forgiveness, despite the absence of an apology and we must forgive when we don't believe they deserve it... just as we never deserve the forgiveness we receive. This process of radical forgiveness may bring forth tears as well. This process is not easy, but it is okay for tears. Like the waters of our baptism washing away our sin, our tears flush out the pain of unforgiveness we are carrying. It's a sign that we are human, that we are alive and we are right where we are supposed to be.

In a few moments, we will have the opportunity to fulfill Jesus commandment to us and engage in the process of foot washing. This act is an extremely intimate one and I know it is uncomfortable for many. Foot washing takes a level of trust and vulnerability from both parties. It is hard to take off our shoes and socks and allow another person to take our foot in his or her hands. It's hard to let someone touch and cleanse our soles. It is also hard to kneel on the floor and extend our hands for the foot of another. In this process, there is something radical going on. In our world, we do not often take time to truly be present with one another. We don't touch one another in this manner. For me things are radical when they don't make sense. To much of the world, what we are about to do, does not make sense. The forgiveness that is offered and received through Jesus washing the feet of Judas doesn't make sense. The forgiveness that we are given in our baptism doesn't make sense. Jesus' death on the cross doesn't make sense and his resurrection certainly doesn't make sense and that- that is what makes this all so radical.

So, I invite us all to come. Let us come and have our feet washed.... Come and wash someone else's feet. Let us come and receive the radical forgiveness of God.... Come and offer forgiveness as we need. Let us come and remember the waters of our baptisms.... Come and close your eyes, listen to the gentle sound of water and find peace.

## A Sermon by

**David M. Goldberg**

Virginia Theological Seminary

Sermon: 7 Epiphany, Year B (Mark 2:1-12)

God calls us to forgiveness because through its mercy we are restored to relationship with him and one another.

In *Pearl*, a novel by Mary Gordon, the grace of forgiveness is explored in its depth. Pearl, after whom the novel is named, is a twenty-year old American student studying abroad in the Republic of Ireland on the eve of the 1999 Good Friday peace agreement. Through the influence of a radical set of newfound Irish friends, Pearl becomes engrossed in the narrative of the Irish fight for freedom. Although unacquainted with faith, Pearl's view of the world becomes increasingly shaped by a sacral language. "Sacrifice," "martyrdom," and "atonement": the meanings of these words were alien to Pearl's secular childhood. Now, in the shadow of the Troubles, these terms come to define a worldview interpreted by a narrative of victimhood; the bombers, hunger-strikers, terrorists and freedom fighters capture the naïve Pearl's imagination.

The story of Irish independence seems to give Pearl's life a new focus, or at least a new subject of study, until a young friend, Stevie, makes a bungled attempt to frighten police with a gaffe. Frustrated by Stevie's stupidity and afraid that the consequences of his actions might have been far worse, Pearl delivers an uncharacteristically cruel insult. Days later, Stevie dies in an automobile accident.

In the immediate aftermath Pearl's feelings of responsibility seem to be confirmed by Stevie's mother, Breedda, who makes clear that Stevie's blood is on Pearl's hands. Pearl is convicted in her guilt. Gordon writes, "Pearl's world explodes; the cover is blown off...Exposed now like the rubble of the buildings and the roads of [the recently bombed] city of Omagh" (Gordon, 169).

Pearl is unable to separate herself from the violence of her act, her unpardonable insult. With a zeal characteristic of the martyrs of Irish history, Pearl offers herself as a witness to Stevie's death by going on a hunger strike. Only, unlike the Irish strikers, Pearl doesn't refrain from food as an act of hopeful protest; rather, it is out of despair that Pearl elects to starve. For Pearl, atonement for Stevie's death means that now she must become the victim. In what she expects to be the last days of her life, Pearl chains herself to the flagpole outside the U.S. embassy in Dublin, awaiting death.

Pearl's story is characteristic of a time bereft of forgiveness; a time paralyzed by a language of violence and victimhood, but without words of hope. I think it is to a time such as this that Jesus gives us the teaching we find in this morning's miracle. Jesus arrives in Capernaum at the commencement of

his ministry. At once, we are told a paralytic man is carried to him on a mat. In first century Palestine, the symptoms of paralysis would not only have been medical. In Jesus' day, paralysis would have had the effect of cutting off someone from society. Unable to work for food, a paralytic may have been consigned to a sort-of pariah status. This outsider status would have only been confirmed by superstitions associating physical affliction with sin.

It is curious, then, that Jesus offers the paralytic "forgiveness" before the man is healed. Is this because Jesus believed paralysis was a just punishment for sin? I doubt it; elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus disavows such an interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it seems that Jesus forgives the paralytic to restore him to relationship. Forgiveness occurs when one accepts the human dignity of a person as worthy of love. Jesus offers forgiveness because forgiveness enables a relationship of equals—and more than equals, but friends. Forgiveness means setting a person free to live into the fullness of their humanity without being reduced to the wrong he or she has committed.

The miracle story we just heard is in fact a parable: the forgiveness Jesus offers enables the paralytic to walk freely, just as Jesus' pardon for sin enables him to walk in newness of life. Why? The act of forgiveness moves the forgiver and the forgiven out of the roles assigned to them by harmful action. Forgiveness makes room neither for victimhood nor violence. Instead, forgiveness is an invitation into love and relationship. In this way, forgiveness challenges the radical individualism characteristic of contemporary society's retreat into the narrow justice of a narrative of injury. I am reminded of St. Pope John Paul II, who states that for the Christian, "there can be no peace without justice, but no true justice without forgiveness."

It is precisely this sort of forgiveness that interrupts Pearl's quest for self-destruction. Having been consigned to a hospital bed, Pearl learns that Stevie's mother has forgiven her. "*Dear Pearl. I hope you're fine. I miss you. Wishing you all the best. Let's get together soon. Love, Breeda.*" A simple message on a card attached to mylar balloons. An invitation to relationship and reconciliation. A message of hope. This simple overture of forgiveness offers a new perspective on a worldview heretofore defined by violence and victimhood. Pearl reflects, "If you've been forgiven, that means what you've done is forgivable. Forgiveness implies a forgiver; after all...forgiveness is a choice." Thus, Pearl proceeds to ask Breeda for forgiveness.

Rowan Williams reflects on forgiveness,  
"The person who asks forgiveness is a person who has renounced the privilege of being right or safe; he has acknowledged that he is hungry for healing, for the bread of acceptance and restoration to relationship. But equally the person who forgives has renounced the safety of being locked into the position of the offended victim; he has decided to take the risk of creating afresh a relationship known to be dangerous, known to be capable of causing hurt. Both the giver and the receiver of forgiveness have moved out of the safety zone; they have begun to ask how to receive their humanity as a gift."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 9:2

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Williams' address at Lutheran World Federation Assembly, Thursday 22nd July 2010

Now, Pearl is “hungry for healing”; she craves “the bread of restoration to relationship.” Having been paralyzed by her guilt, forgiveness permits Pearl to rise and walk again.

Breeda’s act of mercy communicates the kind of forgiveness Jesus offers in the gospel; it enables relationship, freedom, and hope where before there was only suffering and despair. Yes, human beings have the capacity to work great harm in the world, but Jesus gives us the grace to also work great miracles to heal what is hurt. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”<sup>1</sup>

My brothers and sisters, we are called to heal the hurts of the world, but in order to begin in this restorative ministry we must first have the courage to forgive and ask forgiveness. Forgiveness may require us to loosen the chains that bind us to flag poles; or it may encourage us to leave behind the poor comfort of our mats just as it may oblige us to stoop to speak words of love to those who have been cast aside by society. In all things, we are called to forgive because God prefers relationship and friendship to individualism and loneliness.

And may God the Father of forgiveness restore us all to friendship with him, through the reconciliation promised in his Son, who lives and reigns together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:23

## A Sermon by

**Andrew Green**  
**Seminary of the Southwest**  
Scripture: Revelation 5:1-14

There is power at the center. There is meaning at the center. There is a story at the center.

Can you think of a time that someone was really mad at you?

I know I can.

When I was very young (let's call it 7 or 8 years old), my twin brother and I decided to play a game of hide and seek. Instead of hiding ourselves, we decided to hide the keys to my grandfather's tractor. We were often sent outside to play after lunch so that my grandfather could take his early afternoon nap in peace, and this fateful afternoon we managed to make it out of the house with the keys to my grandfather's ancient tractor.

We took the keys out to a flower bed near the shop, and we found an extra special hiding place. It was so special that, after an hour or so had passed, we couldn't even find it ourselves. My grandfather was livid. We combed over every inch of that bed, and every other bed on the four-acre property. The keys were gone.

When my grandmother tells this story, she insists that her intercession saved our young hides. I can picture it clearly: On one side, my brother and I are sobbing our eyes out with fear and shame. On the other, my grandfather is shouting, his face red and scary. In the middle, my grandmother. A gentle pool of peace, reminding my grandfather that we were his tiny precious grandchildren.

My young body was flooded with emotions. Deep down, I knew that I had messed up. I had taken something without asking and now it was lost forever. I knew, deep down, that I had done something bad.

My grandfather, for his part, could see nothing at the time but the loss of his property. He was livid at the injustice that his grandchildren had committed.

At that moment, the story that was at the center of my being was a story of shame. I heard, and I believed, that I was a bad grandkid.

At that moment, the story that was at the center of my grandfather's being was a story of injustice and righteousness. Something important and potentially irreplaceable (the tractor was really old) had been taken away senselessly by his beloved tiny grandchildren.

This story is told over and over again at family gatherings, and it doesn't really have a satisfying ending. Eventually my grandfather calmed down enough to stop shouting, and he eventually forgave us, and of course he loves us. But we never did find those keys.

Can you think of a time when someone was really mad at you?

When someone was really mad at you, what did you feel? Did you feel scared at the threat of broken relationships or retaliation? Did you feel mad at their feelings of anger? Did you feel shame over your misdeeds? At the center of your being, what was the story that was taking place?

Now let's reverse this question. Instead of asking you when someone else was mad at you, I want you to think of a time when you were really mad at someone else.

What's different? What did you feel then? Did you feel righteous anger at being slighted? Did you feel fear that something is being taken away from you? Was there disorientation at losing control? At the center of your being, what was the story that was taking place?

I believe that there is power at the center. There is meaning at the center. And, there is a story at your center.

You see, our centers guide us. The story there directs our motives, and shapes the way that we interact with the world. We all hold our narratives very close. We derive meaning from our stories in such a way that they drive everything about us. You can understand the way that you form relationships with others from the story that you hold in your center.

For many, fear has taken the center. It is the only narrative to be embraced. A desire for safety and being right directs motives. Security provides meaning. Fear answers the question, Who am I and how shall I be? If we allow our desire to be safe above the needs of others to order our steps, the answer to the question is: "At the center, I am for myself."

Our reading from Revelation reveals a different answer. We are shown a vision of heaven: living beings, the throne, the lamps. A scroll that must be read. There are so many glorious and powerful images, certainly more grand and wonderful than anything that could be offered by imperial power, but these are not the center. In the midst of all these things, at the center is a lamb. Standing as if it had been slaughtered. Offered. Given.

In the throne room of heaven, the center is gift.

The very foundation of God's economy is God's gift to us. Our ruler loved us to the very end, Jesus held nothing back. This powerful, incredible gift is vast and unthinkable. We are faced with a burden of gratitude that we can never fully satisfy unless we, too, make gift the center of who we are. If we accept God's gift in our lives, we begin to be able to say, "At the center, I am a gift. I am for others".

What happens when we let the lamb into the very center of our community? What happens if we dare to let lamb into the very center of our being? What happens when we invite the lamb into our divisions, our disparity, our disputes?

When we replace our narratives of fear with the narrative of the lamb, we are transformed from the inside out. The foundation of our lives, the image from which all meaning flows, is gift. Fierce, powerful, outrageously overabundant gift.

When Christ takes his rightful place at the core of our meaning and values, everything we do will be infused with gift. We will be participants here in the world, but we will not be corrupted by the darkness that seeks to divide and conquer to secure wealth and security.

When we allow the gift image of the broken lamb to shape the story that is at our center, we are transformed. In this transformation, reconciliation is possible. We are no longer reduced to narratives that tell us that we are bad children. We are no longer reduced to narratives that require retribution for wrongs done. We see each other through the precious gift that Christ gave us, and we know that we ourselves are gift, too.

With Christ at the center, in our interactions we will see the other as a sister or brother.

With Christ at the center, divisions that have been baked into our very social makeup dissolve.

With Christ at the center, we are charged to fight injustice and stand up for those who are exploited.

With Christ at the center, we join the eternal dance of joyful gifting and gracious receiving that orders all of creation. We are people of forgiveness and people who can be forgiven.

With Christ at the center, we lift up all that we have and all that we are to the throne of God and we receive meaning, and life, and love.

During this time of discernment, my prayer is for God's gift to infuse our decisions and our desires. May the lamb, who is at the center of our community and our very souls, fill us with mercy and peace as we embody God's story in the world. Christ, be our center.

Amen.

## “Seeing the Face of God”

**Jeanne Kaliszewski**  
Church Divinity School of the Pacific

*“Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.*

*But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” - Genesis 33:1-4*

One lesson is very clear from the Bible, one we should all take to heart...one should wish to be, should aspire to be...an only child. *Siblings are dangerous.*

The very first children born in the Bible, the very first human beings born to this earth, are marked by brokenness and violence. Somehow, I imagine God like some exhausted and frustrated parent, shaking her head with exasperation and anger at the ridiculous rivalries and murderous violence playing out amongst her children on earth.

Cain kills Abel, jealous of his brother's favor in the eyes of God, and Abel's blood screams from the ground all the way up to heaven. Jacob steals his brother's inheritance and father's blessing out of a deep rivalry that dates back to the very moment of their birth.

Joseph's brothers plot to kill him and end up selling him into slavery, jealousy again driving brother against brother, leaving a broken-hearted father and a son far from home.

When I was six years old I convinced my younger sister, she could fly. As I held her hand at the top of the basement stairs I whispered into her ear that all she need do is jump. And she jumped.

A few hours later, sitting in the hospital waiting room full of guilt and terror over what I had done and the awful punishment which surely awaited me, my father came through the swinging doors and his long legs quickly ate up the space between us. Bracing myself against the hard-plastic chair for the anger that was surely to come my way, my dad gently took me by the hand and led me to my sister, who wanted me with her while the doctor put on her cast.

What my sister knew, in her innocence not yet hardened by the world, was that our relationship was more important than her own anger, that I was

more than the awful thing I had made her do, and that love was stronger than brokenness and hurt.

Family, the place of our deepest connection, is consistently the location of our greatest pain. But it also may be the place where we may find the deepest forgiveness. And certainly, here Leo Tolstoy's caution is warranted, that "all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way", and when families hurt and reject each other, sometimes forgiveness, and any sort of peace, can only come at a distance, if at all.

But we are knit together into a larger family tree with God at the root holding us fast. And like my father that day, who held my hand and helped me find forgiveness and reconciliation with my sister, God draws us toward one another if we allow ourselves to be led through the hurt and fear to find forgiveness and love.

The love that we receive from God, the love that the Bible tells us about in these stories, recognizes our fractured souls, sees our misdeeds, yet draws us closer in forgiveness to make us whole. These stories in the Hebrew Bible remind us that we human beings have been living and hurting each other and screwing things up since the beginning of time, and God has been with us every step of the way comforting us, reminding us to do the right thing, forgiving us over and over and over again.

And over and over and over again we are called by God to find forgiveness with one another. Forgiveness is a continual process, something we are called to do constantly as we live in community, As Christians we acknowledge the single act of Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the source of all forgiveness, but this is not a "one and done" situation in which we are absolved from doing the work ourselves, here and now. As Christians, we are called to live a life of love for and with others, a life not fully available to us without constant forgiveness of each other and ourselves. And the place where we first practice that kind of forgiveness, the place where we are asked to offer it and ask for it again and again, is family,

Later in Genesis, after Jacob has learned his brother and 400 men approach, after he has sent his wives and children away, when he is left alone with his own thoughts and fear and guilt, a figure arrives in the dark.

Perhaps it felt good to Jacob to hold onto something, to someone solid. After all, he arrived in the world holding tight to his brother's heel, grappling and grasping, digging his plump newborn fingers deep into his brother's soft flesh.

Now he is a man, grown and solid, here again wrestling and grasping, but this time with the unknown. Walter Brueggemann writes of this scene that "Its rich expository possibility is based in part on its lack of clarity, which permits various readings." Jacob does not know with whom he is fighting. Is it Esau? Is it a dream? Is it, perhaps, his past come to remind him of the wrongs he has committed before he sees his brother again?

Forgiveness requires a reckoning. We must reckon with what we have done, wrestle with it, understand it. And like Jacob that night wrestling with his

unknown assailant, we can never truly triumph over the past, we cannot defeat our guilt or bad actions. We must own them, acknowledge them, let them knock us sideways, and only then can we move forward, limping perhaps, toward forgiveness and love with the ones we have hurt.

Maybe what Jacob was doing in that inky blackness was praying. Wrestling with his demons and his past and trying desperately to give those things to God, who in wisdom and mercy and love, is trying to take them from him. Because true forgiveness can come only with and through and in God.

As the sun rises, when the wrestling is done, Jacob asks God for a blessing, asks God for a name. When we are named by God, when we claim our relationship to the Divine in deep and strong ways, that gives us the courage and the power to ask for forgiveness, to offer forgiveness to others.

Jacob, having been named and claimed by God, is able to own his past and offer a deep apology to his brother. He approaches Esau, bows seven times, and the hurt and betrayal is forgiven and what is left is God and love, as Genesis 33 describes: "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Jacob goes on to say to his brother, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." Esau saw that Jacob was more than the terrible things he had done, the hurt he had caused. Instead Esau saw the face of his twin, Esau saw the face of love, Esau saw the face of God.

When we are able to see the face of God in the face of the other, our brother or sister, our friend or a stranger, our parent or our child, only then may we find true forgiveness, offer true forgiveness, and find the wholeness and love possible only in God.

## “Turning Around”

**Aaron Klinefelter**

Church Divinity School of the Pacific

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

I wanted to turn around. I so wanted to turn around.

The road wound its way through the hills and hollers of the dark Appalachian valley. It followed the curve of the creek, past fields of sleeping cows, soggy rows of corn, and doublewide trailers. It was after midnight.

I was driving. Next to me was a young 20something counselor. She was a white, middle-class, and middle-American college student from some liberal arts school.

In the back seat were three black teenage boys. It was one of the longest drives in my entire life.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

We were winding our way, in the middle of the night, through a darkness that was only three lumens brighter than how I felt. We were headed to city hall in Irvine, Kentucky, to the sheriff's office.

The three boys had been accused of stealing. But they refused to confess. And so the Camp Director made the decision that these three boys had to go to the police.

And so here I was driving them in the middle of the night, in southern Kentucky, through the hills of Appalachia, to a good ol' boy sheriff that was some amalgam of Boss Hogg and Barney Fife.

I have never, ever wanted to turn around more than on that drive. And I have never ever felt my naked Whiteness more than at that moment.

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

This all went down at Aldersgate Camp, a United Methodist Church camp nestled in a fertile valley of Needmore Hollow along the banks of the Finchburg branch of one of thousands of little creeks snaking through those rolling hills.

I grew up going there. It was the place where my heart was first strangely warmed by the flame of the Holy Spirit. It was, for me, one of the safest, most beautiful, thin places on earth. A place where the divine and God's good creation meet in a sloppy wet kiss.

But here I was all these years later, leading a week of camp for high school students. The week had been going well, until things started go missing. First it was little things like ball caps and watches, but then wallets and laptops. There were a couple hundred kids at camp that week. But about 30 were from one of the church's urban ministries. Most of these campers were black, while the entirety of the camp staff, counselors, leaders, and all the other campers were white.

When it became apparent that these missing items weren't just misplaced but likely being taken I remember hoping against hope that it wasn't one of the campers from the projects. But all evidence seemed to point to these three young black teenage boys.

I wanted the whole thing to turn around ... but it was like this slow-motion juggernaut that was propelled forward by 400 years of bias and prejudice and mistrust. It was painful.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

So, campers were questioned. Accusations made. And then the bag was found.

A black duffle bag filled all the things that had gone missing. The bag belonged to one of these black young men. But they still would not confess. They had all been seen together wandering off from the group. And so, the Camp Director made the call that all of them had to go to the police station. In the middle of the night. And I had to take them.

I don't remember being required to go, but I had to go. I owed it to them.

So we drove and drove those 30 minutes to town that felt like 30 hours. We didn't talk much. I had no idea what awaited us on the other side. Their youth director had been called, she was on the way. All I wanted to do was turn around.

How it all turned out matters less than the journey we took to get to this naked place. I don't remember if charges were filed or mug shots taken.... I just remember feeling like this should not be the way of things.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

We didn't turn around on that midnight journey as we etched our way through the steamy, verdant hills of southern Kentucky. We didn't solve any problems or fix any injustice or heal any wounds. If anything, we probably carved a few of those deeper into the souls of these three young black men.

But something turned in me. Something is still turning. And my prayer, my deep, anxious longing is that something somehow keeps turning.

O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

## A Sermon by

**Brian Prall**

Seminary of the Southwes

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I wonder, have any of you ever done anything so offensive, so shameful, intentionally or otherwise, that you the offender, racked with guilt, wept bitterly? If you have not, that is great. It is not exactly a life goal for which one strives. This is, however, what the Gospel of Luke says Peter did upon the realization that he had denied his teacher, his friend, his Lord three times. Peter heard the cock crow, remembered Jesus' words, and went out and wept bitterly.

Luke's Passion narrative relates a number of rich scenes, heart wrenching scenes that speak of betrayal, remorse, forgiveness, and redemption. Early in the narrative Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. Peter denies Jesus to save himself. Pilate really wants to release Jesus, but is compelled by an angry mob to execute him. Jesus prays for his tormentors saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." One of those crucified with Jesus repents and asks that Jesus remember him, to which Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." And of course, Jesus rises triumphantly from death redeeming the whole world.

While many of these scenes depict Jesus as the ultimate forgiver, his moving exchange with the condemned criminal on a cross next to him being one of my favorites, I cannot help but be drawn back to Peter and this moment when he weeps bitterly. It is such a strong adverb, "bitterly", to describe the act of weeping. I have offended others in my day, people whom I love, and once or twice so shamefully that I, the offender, wept bitterly. There are few emotions quite as powerful as weeping bitterly; weeping from some of the lowest recesses of guilt and shame. I think the reason it is so powerful is that in that moment you can actually feel the distance you have placed between God and yourself. You have heard it said that something that rends a gulf between you and God is called sin. In weeping bitterly, you are not merely aware of your sin; your sin is palpable.

As awful as this feeling is, however, I am oddly grateful to have experienced it. Naturally I would have given most anything to avoid getting myself into the predicaments that caused this feeling in the first place, but the lemonade I am choosing to make from those lemons is embracing the transformative process born of that pain, born of weeping bitterly. I am grateful for being in the position to necessitate mercy and grace, and even more grateful to have had that mercy and grace extended to me. In other words, I am grateful to have been forgiven.

The relief that comes from this forgiveness is equally as palpable as any of the remorse. I don't know about you, but I tend to carry all of my guilt and shame in my gut and on my shoulders, and neither part of my anatomy is shy about letting me know this. When I am forgiven, though, the knot that has constricted my innards unfastens and the weight falls off my shoulders brick by

brick. Trust is restored between me and the one offering forgiveness, and the gap between God and me is narrowed.

To be forgiven in such a fashion has made me a more compassionate, patient, and understanding person. I have become a better forgiver, if one can claim such a thing. That is no small feat either, as I am genetically predisposed to hold grudges for a minimum of twenty years. My father, like his father before him, makes grudge holding a veritable art form, one I avoided taking up, for the most part, with a few healthy doses of humble pie.

Now if your response to my initial question of whether or not you've so offended another as to have wept bitterly at the thought of your actions was "no", take heart in the fact that this does not preclude you from understanding how to extend mercy and grace to others. I would hate for anyone to get the idea that they need to leave here immediately and commit a felony in order to see how that shakes out. In the spirit of "Let any of you who is without sin cast the first stone," I feel I must inform you that you have all already sinned at some point. I am sorry if this is the first you are hearing of it. Lord knows I hate being the bearer of bad news.

The good news is that you have also been forgiven. Through Christ Jesus, mercy and grace have been given to you so that you may rise up a new and more compassionate person in your own right. The only stipulation is that you receive it faithfully, taking it as a gift meant to strengthen you and help you flourish as one of Christ's own.

Peter eventually receives this gift of forgiveness through Jesus, though we have to venture out of Luke and into John's Gospel to find it. After eating a well-balanced breakfast of bread and fish, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, and after each time that Peter responds, "Yes," Jesus gives him a charge: "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," "Feed my sheep." Three moments of forgiveness for each of Peter's three denials. Three biddings by the risen Christ restoring trust in the man who is to carry on his ministry.

Like Peter, we who are followers of Christ and recipients of his mercy and grace must understand that the gift does not end with us. Rather, in the true sense of a gift economy, we must perpetuate it onwards, forgiving those who offend, dare I say trespass, against us. It is hard to fathom how in this world where we are given such grace for our own misdeeds we still labor to extend that grace to others. My God, how we can abuse each other for the slightest offenses.

"I asked for Pepsi, not Coke, stupid."

"I said with sprinkles, idiot. How hard is your job?"

"You are sitting in my pew. Move."

"That's not how our last priest did it."

I wonder what our world would be like, what our churches would be like, if we really took to heart the grace and forgiveness offered by our own Jesus Christ and shared it with others? Maybe, just maybe, by understanding the grace with which we are forgiven in Christ, we can better extend that grace and forgive others, even if we really did order it with sprinkles.

Amen.

## “On Binding and Loosing”

**The Rev. Joslyn Schaefer**

Grace Church, Waynesville North Carolina  
Proper 16 Year A; Matthew 16: 13-20

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

If you’ve taken a close look at our church’s seal, you will see the Latin translation of these words. As a church bearing Peter’s name, it seems good and right to wrestle with, play with and ponder just what this verse means.

But it is okay if the *meaning* isn’t immediately evident to us. In fact, understanding what Jesus means by “this rock” is one of the most hotly contested issues in our Christian history!

From a Roman Catholic perspective Peter is the Rock, on which the Church will be built. After all, *Petros*, the Greek name for Peter, and *petra*, the Greek word for Rock, sound pretty close. Catholics argue that with this text Jesus is instituting the apostolic succession, that is, that Jesus chooses Peter to have specific authority in the group of people who come to share Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. And, Catholics suggest, this succession has continued until today; each of us can continue in this chain reaching back to Jesus through confirmation and ordination, in which the Bishop lays hands on us. Over time, Roman Catholic tradition thought of Peter as the first “pope” (of course, that was a role that didn’t exist in Peter’s time).

Well, the Protestant Reformation, which was this conflagration of religious and political issues, did not like this idea of Peter as Pope. They were suspicious of the conflation of church and state, and of hierarchy generally. So they argued that the “rock” was Jesus referred to was the *faith* that enabled Peter’s recognition of who Jesus was. The “rock” is our faith in Jesus rightly understood as God’s Son.

Now as Anglicans, we are specialists in valuing truth in “apparently” opposing perspectives. Yes, we side with the Catholics: Jesus did bestow on Peter a special role in the founding of the Church. And Yes, we side with Protestants: it takes faith to make the “irrational and mysterious” confession that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, that what happened on the Cross reconciles the world to God.

But being a good Anglican, I can’t help but wonder if there isn’t yet another way, a third way, to understand what the “rock” upon which Jesus builds the Church – could it be the “rock” to which Jesus refers is the practice of “binding and loosing” one another? The foundation, the rock of healthy communities (be it marriages or partnerships, church communities, even a

workplace) is the ability to seek forgiveness, to accept forgiveness and to forgive.

Binding and loosing. Accountability and Grace. Forgiveness. The spiritual rock on which true community is built.

Think about it: Binding and loosing, but especially binding, are part of everyday behavior: pettiness, holding grudges, passive-aggressive comments, sending people of “guilt trips” -- these are all the little ways we bind one another. Loosing, on the other hand, is a bit more straight forward, but far more difficult to: it is always love expressed through forgiveness.

Let me give you an example of an experience here at church that could have easily resulted in binding, but instead was one of loosing:

Early last Spring, in March, the Room in the Inn Team was completing their 17<sup>th</sup> consecutive Wednesday of providing overnight hospitality for twelve of our homeless neighbors. Most volunteers only serve once a month on a team, but there are a few in leadership roles who come every Wednesday to help. And a snarky comment from one volunteer to another was uttered. In the voicing of this snarky comment, both the speaker and the recipient were, in some ways, bound by it. And they had *choices* of how to respond:

The speaker may have felt badly and awkward; turned toward destructive self-talk; tried to avoid the person to whom he had made the remark. All sorts of ways to keep being bound – to avoid the process of loosing.

And the person who received the remark had options: harbor resentment; become passive-aggressive by bringing up how hurt she whenever an opportunity arose; gossiping among other volunteers. Again, all sorts of ways to keep being bound by one incident.

But – with the help of the Spirit – the two folks engaged in honest conversation. The speaker apologized, gave some context for why the remark was made but took responsibility and asked forgiveness. The recipient of the comment acknowledged that it hurt, appreciated the apology and forgave. The air was cleaned. They loosed one another from the hurt that situation caused and unleashed that energy to do good.

Binding and loosing. Accountability and Grace. The spiritual rock on which Jesus builds true community.

But perhaps the place where binding and loosing can have the most extreme consequences is in the context of our families.

I had the recent pleasure of Marilynne Robinson’s most recent fiction book called *Home*. (I hope some of you know Marilynne Robinson’s work – she wrote *Gilead*, which just might top my list for most profound fiction.) *Home* is a retelling of the Prodigal Son story, but with a twist. While the elderly

father, Rev. Boughton, and upright elderly Presbyterian minister, welcomes with great anticipation and fanfare his wayward son Jack home after Jack burned some bridges and then burned them again over a twenty-year absence. The good reverend desperately wants the peace that comes with forgiveness; he wants to right the relationship, to be grace-full, but as the novel unfolds, Rev. Boughton can't get over the embarrassment and shame he endured from his son's actions. Through passive-aggressive dinner prayers and grating judgmental comments toward his son, it is clear that the Rev. Boughton is bound by the past and though he wants to be loosed from it, it seems to be beyond his power.

And Jack, also seeking the restoration of the relationship can't himself get over the legitimate guilt about the pain he caused his family and is hurt time and again by his father's remarks. He comes home looking for grace but leaves convinced he is beyond the boundary of not only of this father's love but of God's love, too. Heartbreaking story, but one that resonates as so true in many of our family experiences.

Often in families we experience not only the bind of disappointment or hurt from others, but also the double bind of wanting to forgive and reconcile but finding ourselves unable to do often under the weight of generations of intransigent patterns: we get stuck in ruts we didn't create. But perhaps when we find ourselves in these double binds that we are most open to recognizing our need for divine intervention to help us overcome patterns that leave us chained. In these moments, we need to the grace to see ourselves and the other person, as God does, as already forgiven, already made right, unleashed for lives of goodness and service.

But the good news is that, from God's perspective, we are unbound. Forgiveness has already happened; we are made right with God through the mysterious passion of Jesus – his death, resurrection and ascension. It is from this awareness that we are able to unbind, to forgive, to loose others. Robert Llewelyn, the great spiritual writer and teacher, says "Perfection in forgiveness goes hand in hand with perfection in humility," that is, "the more we are able to enter into the reality of all that God has forgiven us the more possible it will be to forgive others."

Binding and loosing. Accountability and grace. Forgiveness. The spiritual rock of healthy community.

It can be hard to realize that we are as in need of God's grace as desperately as the person who has hurt us. This was the stumbling block for Rev. Boughton, in the novel *Home*, I think. And very often the stumbling block for us.

But we come to church, week after week, and say the corporate confession and hear the truth of how God sees us: forgiven, healed, renewed. We pray day by day the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." And as we do this, I believe the Spirit joins us at chipping away at the stumbling blocks that keep us bound – only to find, in

the end, a beautiful rock...The rock that Jesus uses to build up the household of God, the Body of Christ, finally loosed upon a world that is bound, loosed for goodness at last.

## “Generations of Forgiveness”

**Laura Eustis Siriani**

Bloy House, The Episcopal School at Claremont

These days forgiveness and reconciliation are on our minds. We are a country divided by race, religion, values and a political climate that is anchored in bitterness and acrimony. It has been a long time coming and now we yearn for a way out. We ask for God’s forgiveness, we pray the Lord’s prayer on Sunday and believe that we can live out our baptismal covenant to see Christ in everyone. Yet somehow, it does not always translate to our weekday lives of one explosive story of division after another. It’s as though we are casting lots, gambling for the soul of our country. I find myself saying and thinking un-Christian thoughts about my neighbor. And, the cycle continues. Forgive us Jesus; we do not know what we are doing to each other. Help us find the way out.

Here’s what I do know: The business of forgiveness can take a long time, sometimes generations. I recently learned this first hand from my own family. Our story goes back to my grandparents who were raising their five children during the great depression, when my grandfather lost his job as a cotton broker. In order to make ends meet my grandparents took in a boarder, Miss Sarah. My grandfather and Sarah became lovers and eventually my grandparents divorced. Similar stories are played out in families across America. In our case, we never talked about it. The message was: “Don’t ask”. I was only vaguely aware that my father was the only one of his sibling who had any contact with both of his parents. Many years later, I learned the whole story: After the divorce, my father’s brothers and sisters sided with their mother and had little contact with their father for the rest of their lives. My grandmother was bitter and that bitterness carried over to her children and in some cases to their children. We became part of what Henri Nouwen describes as a “chain of wounds and needs that reach far beyond our own memories and aspirations.” We were taught to carry the damage.

We (the grandchildren) were left with a confusing crack in our lives that was not of our making. We did not know most of our uncles or aunts and only a few of the cousins; we were never fully a family. As will happen, not long ago, one of the *next* generation cousins reached out to learn more about our family history and the story emerged. Through the great miracle of social media, we have been able to connect the generations and share our stories. The cousins write of their parent’s regret at not having a relationship with their father and of their inability to make a move toward reconciliation as if it would change the balance of some invisible scales. Some write of their parent’s steadfast belief that it was right to penalize their father. All of us inherited a point of view – but the overriding sentiment in these communications remains one of grief over “the split” and what might have been. A turning point came when one of the cousins posted a picture of a wooden carving our grandfather had made for her. It turns out that we all have one or two of his carvings. It was his way of reaching out to the next generations. Those beautifully crafted, hand painted carvings became a point of healing and a realization that our grandfather’s heart had been broken open by losing the ones he loved. They speak: I forgive. Forgiveness has many sides and can be a long time coming.

Contrast my family's simple even familiar story with the horrific 2015 mass shootings at the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston. We all know the story: Nine people, including the pastor were killed during a prayer service. To a person, the relatives of those who were killed expressed almost immediate public forgiveness to killer Dylann Roof. How can this be explained? The flip answer might be that they have had plenty of practice. Our brothers and sisters have had to forgive over and over and over again; slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, mass incarceration and simply being overlooked by a taxi driver...the list of injustices go on and on and on. But, forgiveness is in the DNA of the community at Emmanuel. Whether they feel it or not, whether it makes sense or not, is not the point. They made a statement and a commitment to forgive. Nadine Collier lost her mother that night and grieves for her to this day. But her initial words, two days after the horror, rang powerfully in the public conscience and conversation. "I forgive you," she told her mother's killer. "You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you." It was in that hearing that *she* learned about forgiveness, its power and its challenge. "Forgiveness is power. It means you can fight everything and anything head on."

You see, this community had done the hard work, way before Dylann Roof entered those church doors. Through their own experience of God's grace, they have taught their children about forgiveness. They live it and know that in order to survive they must learn to forgive. *They know that in God's world they are forgiven.*

We saw the same thing happen in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, when a non-Amish man shot 10 young female students. Five were killed before the killer turned the gun on himself. It wasn't the event itself that helped define the community, but what happened just hours after the shooting. An Amish man walked into the home of the shooters' parents and said, "We will forgive you." He was making a gesture to God that he would forgive. But by making that statement, he was opening the door to absolution. Today the mother of the killer, spends her Fridays with one of the most severely injured.

All of these stories raise questions for us: How are we working in our own homes and communities of faith to build cultures that forgive? Are we teaching our children to forgive? Are we overcoming darkness in the world with good, as Jesus so clearly taught us? When tragedy comes, can we respond like the people of Charleston and Nickel Mines? For Jesus, forgiveness is not passive. Forgiveness is not laying down and rolling over, it reaches out with intention. Forgiveness listens, it sees and it speaks: "I will forgive you". The truth is, we cannot be the Jesus people without it.

The other truth is that we know what to do: In our tradition, we confess, we are forgiven and we *remember*. We *remember* that Jesus came to us, to live as one of us, breaking open his heart for us; we *remember* his life that turned the world upside down, by teaching us to love instead of hate. We *remember* that Jesus had the audacity to ask God to forgive his persecutors: "they do

not know what they are doing”. We bear witnesses to the power of those few words: “father forgive them”.

The things we remember each week at this table are our stories. The hard work is ours, not just individually, but in this community. We do not have generations to reconcile with each other. There can be no better time than now to remember that this is who we are so that even in this broken world, our stories permeate through the generations making all of us free to truly be the people of Jesus.

Amen.

## “Father, Forgive”

**The Rev. Amy Spagna**  
Christ Church, Westerly, Ohio  
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Maybe we can finally breathe again, now that night has fallen. There is no other way to say it: this has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, one where it seems evil has finally gotten the upper hand on God. From the standpoint of the disciples, their lives have been changed incredibly in the past 24 hours, and not for the better. Their leader, teacher, and friend is dead. Arguably, he was murdered at the hands of a group of people whose only objective was preserving the status quo at any cost. At least they let Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and a few of the others take his body down from the cross and bury it just a bit ago, before sunset came and stopped any work from happening on this first Sabbath of the Passover season.

At least he's safe – and so are his followers, for the time being. They've probably scattered throughout the city in small groups, left with little else to do but be together in stunned silence. They probably cannot believe that his happened at all. Yes, he told them it would. But we didn't take his word for it. How could they, when that prediction meant the end of life as they'd come to know it? Alongside the silence of this extinguished fire is a distinct sense of restlessness that's permeated all of Jerusalem. There is no telling what will happen next, or whether the police will come for them, too. And so they are left with little to do besides retreat behind locked doors and try to make sense out of all of it.

Among the many, many things we can join the disciples in contemplating on this day is one of the so-called “Seven Last Words” – the composite of what all four Gospels record as his having said in those last few agonizing hours on the cross. The first of these comes from Luke's account: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, NRSV). That he can even pray this in light of the incredible physical and emotional pain he had to have been experiencing at that moment is nothing short of remarkable. His friends have mostly run away, and the ones who did stay around can do nothing at all to help him. Matthew's version tells us that the Jewish authorities had turned against him out of jealousy and fear instead of protecting him. In what has to be the most infamous example of triangulation in human history, they took their jealousy and fear to the Roman governor to resolve. He in turn applied Roman law, and concluded that this so-called prophet from a backwater town was enough of a threat to the peace to justify executing as soon as possible. So, if we want to point the finger of blame, there is plenty to go around... and plenty of people for whom Jesus asks God's forgiveness.

It isn't necessarily superhuman for him to have done so. However, that he needs some help from his Father to get there shows that there are limits to the mercy that even his humanity, augmented as it is by his divine nature, can show. Jesus forgave so many people of their sins in the course of his public ministry that it's not all that shocking to hear him do try to do so it again. At

least, that's how we want to hear it. Listen to it again: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Notice that he does not say to them, as he does to the woman who anointed his feet and dried them with her hair, that, "your sins are forgiven." He can't quite find it within himself – not when iron spikes are being driven through his wrists and ankles, thorns are ripping into his head, he's struggling just to breathe, and the crowd is openly and loudly mocking him. Asking God to do it is the best he can manage. And, it is enough to hope that absolution will be offered, even if the responsible parties cannot or will not receive it.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness, especially as one of the defining characteristics of the relationship between God and God's people, goes both ways. As much as we marvel at Jesus' ability to pray for it, it begs the question of whether we can forgive God for letting this happen in the first place. And, can we forgive God for continuing to allow bad things to happen to us – things which leave only ruined lives in their wake?

Perhaps we can, though getting there will take the hard work of allowing our rational minds to talk our primitive feelings of anger and fear off the ledge. If we can manage it, we will find that God did not just allow the suffering and horror of Good Friday to happen – no more than God just allows suffering to befall us. Jesus had to make the choice to go through with it on his own. He wasn't sure he wanted to do it. Three times he left the disciples napping in the garden at Gethsemane, and three times he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want" (Matthew 26:39, NRSV). Once he made up his mind to obey God's wishes, he did nothing to stop the process, despite how it was well within his power to do so. To borrow from Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant, it is on the account of everyone involved in perpetrating this tragedy that he is made to go through this most cruel and unusual punishment. What makes it that much harder to stomach is that the Servant has done nothing wrong, and offers no retaliation or defense. Yet, he is still cut off from the land of the living and stricken for the transgression of the people. As one scholar asks, is this really, "... required of those who work for God's promise?... Clearly, we lament the death of Jesus Christ as those left behind. Is it equally clear that we persist in making separations between people, so that there are still those who are outcast and despised? Why do we ask the innocent to go on suffering affliction? In our own time, it seems sadly true that the nations have not ceased to ask for such sacrifices. When will we put an end to suffering?"<sup>2</sup> And when will we finally ask God's help to do so, as Jesus himself does?

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<sup>1</sup> David R. Henson, "Unforgiving Jesus on the Cross."

<http://patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2012/04/unforgiving-jesus-on-the-cross-an-unconventional-good-friday-reflection/> [accessed April 7, 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Highbaugh, "Homiletical Perspective: Isaiah 52:13-53:12." *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 285.

## A Sermon By

**Kathleen Walker**

Virginia Theological Seminary

One of the challenges of preaching is taking words written thousands of years ago and making them relevant for today. The words we hear from the Bible this morning are as important as ever, if we listen closely.

On Tuesday, we were awakened to news that Alton Sterling, a 37-year old man from Baton Rouge, had been gunned down by two white police officers. My heart sank. I thought, oh no, not again. Please God, how do we wrap our minds around the images of one more incident of a black man on the ground with an officer on his neck, shots being fired and knowing that in a few weeks or months, perhaps even a year from now, someone is going to tell us that what we saw is not what happened? Once again, I was grappling with grief, this time for Mr. Sterling's children and his parents, significant others and the nation as a whole. Later in the day, there was a woman standing in front of cameras vowing to get justice for her child's father. The 15-year-old was inconsolable. The police were on television promising transparency. Does this sound familiar?

While I was trying to process what that could mean in terms of racial tension and possible rioting, there was yet another story. On Wednesday, the death of Mr. Sterling had been replaced with another awful story, complete with live streaming if you were on Facebook. This was the killing of Mr. Philando Castille, a 32-year old who was stopped because of a busted taillight. According to his girlfriend who was in the car, he informed the officer that he had a concealed weapon and a license to carry. When he reached in his pocket reportedly for his driver license, the police officer shot him, and before his mother could reach him at the hospital, he was pronounced dead.

Two days. Two deaths.

Admittedly, I was nervous as a black woman, because a man had mentioned to me earlier that day that one of my taillights was out. I immediately called a friend and asked him to repair it right away. How can anyone lose their life over a tail light?

It can be difficult to catch your breath sometimes. Newscasters and pundits were trying to advance theories on what is going on in America right now. There are so many questions. How should we in Black America respond to these incidents of what appear to be brutality? How can we stop constantly weeping collectively for such unnecessary and flagrantly offensive loss of life? There was a post on Facebook shared by some of you in this congregation. It read, "I can't keep calm, I have a black son, husband, father, nephew and grandson."

As we were still reeling about our black children and adults in our nation, and lo and behold, during a peaceful protest in Dallas on Thursday during which police officers and protesters were taking pictures and walking together, gun shots rang out. Neither group seemed to know what was happening. People just started running. There was chaos. This time it was police officers who were being gunned down. In a matter of minutes, five white law enforcement officers had lost their lives and seven others were injured. Two civilians were also shot in that melee.

I don't know about you, but it was just too much. Here we are, a few days later, and like so many people, my heart is heavy.

Now, there are those who are claiming that the Black Lives Matter Movement is responsible for the deaths of the officers. So, if I stand up for my rights and some deranged person kills a group of people, am I to blame? Let's face it. Everyone should be horrified at the deaths of those officers. We have police in our families; they are our friends and classmates and church members. So, any suggestion that black people are not affected by the killing of police is incorrect. What is really amazing to me is that if a former military apparently mentally ill young man of color decides to aim his rage at police, there is no public discussion of mental health issues. On the other hand, when other people kill folks who look like us, there always seems to be a conversation at some point about PTSD or some other palpable illness.

All of these things point to a very sad fact: we are broken. We must learn how to talk to each other. We have to tear down the walls between the many ethnicities in our land and the racial divides, and work for coherent understanding and compassion toward one another. We are never going to be reconciled as long as we refuse to honestly confront the issue of race in the United States.

The Most Reverend Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop, issued a beautiful statement in the aftermath of this very difficult week, talking about how we are all children of God. He reminded us that we were created, each and every one of us, in the image of God, each of us deserves to live with dignity and respect. He urged us to pray in the days and weeks ahead. Because all lives do matter. Unlike the days of slavery when a black man was considered 3/5 of a human being, today we embrace the reality that all people are 100% human, all made in God's image. And black lives do matter.

So how do make sense of this madness? Let's face it. We cannot live in a society where police officers cultivate a culture of gunning down black and brown people with little or no regard for us as human beings. Conversely, we cannot exist in a world where citizens continuously take aim at those who are sworn to protect us.

This is exactly the time when we turn our focus to the lessons we have just read and hear what God is saying to all God's people.

Psalms 25, which was most likely written by King David, calls on God to remember his compassion and love for they are from everlasting. As Christians, we must pray daily for guidance and patience, knowing that God's

love and compassion are eternal and yet our current reality. We have the assurance that God loves us and is ever-present. Even now. Especially now.

Even in the midst of all of the turmoil taking place these days, God offers an umbrella of peace. We must be willing to take a respite and sit in the shade. Step away from the newscasts and the commentaries so that you will not be overwhelmed by breathtaking grief. Kiss your children and other loved ones. We cannot change what has happened, but under peaceful conditions, we may be able, each in our own way, to affect the future of bringing about God's kingdom of peace and justice.

What is peace? An anonymous writer defines it helpfully in this way: "Peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart."

There are times when we must wrestle with both God and the community as we seek answers and solutions. There are also moments in time when we as a community will be tested. Even Jesus was tested. That is part of the story today in the Gospel of Luke.

Wanting to test Jesus, the lawyer asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

It was the right answer. And Jesus said so. "Do this and live," Jesus said. Sounds easy right? Just love your God and love your neighbor.

But the lawyer needs more information and wants to know who Jesus is talking about. Who is his neighbor?

In response Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan; a man beaten, robbed and left for dead lying in the middle of the road. A priest comes upon the man, and crosses the street. Then a Levite who looks at him and he too crosses the road. But the Samaritan, the stranger among the Jews, he responded with compassion. It was the Samaritan who bandaged the wounded man as best he could, and took him to safety where he could rest and begin to heal. It was the Samaritan, the feared enemy, who paid for the injured man's resting place.

We are called to be that Samaritan and help our wounded neighbor even as we are grappling with ways to heal ourselves. We are called to be that Samaritan even if others still view us as the enemy. The world can only heal when we are all invested in the healing. Envision a world where we will not have to be afraid that a chance encounter with a law enforcement officer could prevent us from returning home at the end of the day. And then start making that vision a reality. We must continue to work toward making that world our reality, a world in which

we can live peacefully with people of all colors and nationalities and see them as our neighbors.

This is difficult work. It asks much of us. Dearly beloved, we are asked to forgive. Even today.

Remember the family members of the Charleston Nine? They came forward before they buried their loved ones and offered forgiveness to the killer Dylan Roof. Remember them today. And let their example teach us.

Anger is a heavy suitcase. In order to unload some of this baggage of fear and anger, we must set the bags down. And we start by doing this difficult task that will make our burdens lighter.

Love your neighbor, your police office neighbor, and the white supremacist neighbor. If we focus on love and compassion, I believe we will find the peace that feels so elusive in the midst of the chaos.

With God's help, we can lead the movement that "all lives matter" and in so doing, we can help heal the world."

Amen.

## A Sermon by

**Anne Marie Witchger**  
 General Theological Seminary  
 Forgiveness, 1 John 1:5-10

I know that our sermon topic is forgiveness, but to be honest, forgiveness has not been my strongest virtue this year.

At the risk of over-sharing, I want to tell you about an experience I had this winter. I woke up on the morning of Sunday, February 12<sup>th</sup> (I remember because it was my husband's birthday) with a horrible stinging pain in the center of my back. I asked my husband to take a look, and sure enough there was a cluster of red bumps across my upper spine. I had no idea what this could be, but I got on my phone and started googling. I will spare you the kinds of hits and images my search returned, but after a little poking around, I was pretty sure I knew what was going on and, sure enough, a doctor confirmed it later that afternoon: shingles.

If you don't know, shingles is a recurrence of the chicken pox virus. At 28, I am just old enough to have missed out on the chicken pox vaccine and so this virus has been lying dormant in my body for decades, just waiting to strike again. Shingles is most common in elderly people, but can be triggered by stress or a weakened immune system in people of all ages.

When I came down with shingles I was in the middle of a very stressful and sad situation at the church where I work. I won't go into details, but I will say that a light had been shone on some very unhealthy and dishonest behavior of a church leader whom I trusted and respected. The impact of that betrayal and the turmoil of a formal investigation was hitting me, hard.

The morning after my shingles diagnosis, I woke up exhausted and irritable and I found the shingles rash appearing in other places across my back and chest. *Forgiveness?* No way. How about accountability; exposing injustice; healing those who have been hurt?

In our Epistle reading today, John reminds us that God is light. And he invites us to walk in that light, because it is only in the light of Christ that we find fellowship with one another and with God; only in the light of Christ can we be cleansed from sin.

Now, there was nothing godly about my shingles or the stressful situation at my church, but something *was* happening. Things that had been hidden—were rising up, coming into the light.

Have you ever shined a flashlight under your couch to look for a lost item? If you did that in my apartment, I guarantee you would find dust and dirt and probably a bunch of other things, too. Walking in the light of Christ is about drawing out darkness, transforming those places and parts of ourselves that are dark and hidden, and bringing them forward. Sometimes, when we commit to walking in light we make visible those parts of us we would rather remain hidden.

Before the shingles I had been praying for God to give me the strength to be a light for this church as it went through a dark time. But walking in the light with God is not as easy as shining a flashlight under a couch. God's light is not one-directional—you can't just shine it on one spot without illuminating everything else around it, too. The more I prayed for God's light to be in me so that I could shine it on others, the weaker I got. The angrier and more exhausted I felt.

I was neglecting my own weakness, my own darkness in the spirit of helping others. My body was trying to tell me something: Anne Marie, you can't hide your stress and your exhaustion anymore. You can't hide your anger, your judgment, your fear. How had I been dealing with the stress at work? Had I chosen to walk in the light and be in fellowship with other Christians? No way! I was praying, but I was also going home and eating cookies and ice cream every night before bed. As a priest-in-training, was I being honest with myself about how scary it was to watch a leader's actions cause so much harm to a community? No way. I was keeping myself so busy that I didn't have to think about a deeper fear—*could that be me, or one of my friends some day?*

Walking in the light is not easy because as we expose ourselves to others and to God we are forced to see ourselves, too. We are forced to see the ways that we are not as good as we would like to be; we are not as together as we think we are; we are not as strong as we pretend to be. When you strive to walk in the light, you risk letting the ugliest, most embarrassing parts of yourself rise to the surface—sometimes quite literally.

But the scripture says that is how we heal. That is how we find fellowship with one another. That is how we open ourselves up to Christ's forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness is not just about doing something wrong and saying you're sorry, it is about experiencing wholeness through restored relationships, through inviting God into our brokenness. Forgiveness is about allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to be healed. In a strange, paradoxical way, I understood that I needed God's forgiveness as much as the church leader who had transgressed. I began to pray for God's light to shine on me, not just for the strength to shine it on others.

The good news, the *great* news, is that God is faithful when we seek that light. When we commit to walking in the light of Christ, God commits to holding our burdens; God holds our fear and our distress; God forgives us, restores us, always. No matter how much dirt and dust has built up in our lives, the light of Jesus shining in us and on us is uncontainable.

I'm still working on forgiveness, but God's forgiveness has never been in question. Whatever darkness you might be holding—and often those of us in ministry hold a lot of darkness, ours and that of others; we do not have to carry it alone, or in secret. We can invite God's light to free us so that we can receive the fullness of God's love and mercy.

## “The First Thing We Need”

Ben Wyatt

Berkeley Theological School at Yale

Lectionary Text: Mark 2:1-10

Will you pray with me?

*Almighty God, through the written word and through the spoken word, may we come to know your living Word, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*

Some of you may know the name Reynolds Price. He was an American writer and poet who wrote, among other things, a book called *A Letter to a Man in the Fire*. You see, Price had suffered from a particularly vicious form of spinal cancer, and while surgery and chemotherapy was able to remove the tumor from his spine, the operation left him paralyzed below his legs. Years later, a reader of his was diagnosed with the same form of spinal cancer, and wrote to Price asking for any wisdom he might have. The book is Price’s reply, and in it he reports having a striking vision of Jesus during his treatment.

In the vision, Jesus meets Price on the shores of the lake of Galilee, and beckons him to come out into the water. Once in the lake, Jesus began taking handfuls of water, gently washing the surgical wound on Price’s spine, and said to him, “Your sins are forgiven.” Price, still in the grips of his cancer and facing chemotherapy, thinks impatiently to himself, “Forgiveness is the last thing I need.” So, he asks Jesus if he is cured as well. And after a pause that signaled reluctance, Jesus says “That too” and walks away from Price as the encounter ends.

There is, of course, much that we could say about this vision, far more than we have time to talk about today. What I want to focus on is what this story illuminates about our Gospel text: the way in which Jesus comes bearing gifts, but perhaps not always the gifts we were seeking.

I wonder if that paralytic man and his friends felt the same way as Reynolds Price. Here they are, having gone to extraordinary lengths to reach Jesus – climbing up on a rooftop, hacking away the roof, lowering the mattress down, so that this man is *right there* in front of Jesus. Right there, in all his paralyzed agony. It’s not hard to miss who he is, and impossible to miss what he wants. No words are needed. It’s clear that they are asking for another healing miracle from Jesus, the healer extraordinaire. And Jesus sees their faith, their *chutzpah*, their confidence in his power and their eagerness in attaining it, and he turns to this man and says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

What an odd thing to say. What an odd thing to say to a man whose body has become weak and vulnerable to disease, who experiences all sorts of pain the able-bodied do not even know exists, whose very power of movement has been stolen from him, who lives with the unearned and unfair and merciless feeling of *uselessness* that can haunt the chronically ill. What an odd thing to offer forgiveness to a man so obviously and painfully in need of healing. It would be easy, I think, for this man to hear Jesus’s offer and think, “Forgiveness is the last thing I need.”

And he's not the only one.

Even if it's nothing so dramatic as cancer or paralysis, I would wager that life has taken something from all of us in this room – something that we *really* want back. Maybe that something is a cherished relationship that didn't go the way you wanted it to; or a stable, secure job that you lost; or a long illness; or perhaps it's simply the things that time eventually takes away from all of us. But whatever it is, I think we all have wounds that we would really like for God to heal.

And when we're dealing with those wounds, it's hard to think about anything else.

Forgiveness can seem like the last thing we need.

Now, make no mistake – healing is part of the story here. “Take up your mat and walk” is just as much a part of this story as “Your sins are forgiven.” Yet I can't shake the feeling that there is something significant about the fact that Jesus offers forgiveness to this man *first*. I can't shake the feeling that this is not just Jesus being callous, or not understanding what this man needs, or even making some theological statement about our sinfulness before God. And maybe the reason I can't shake that feeling is because the healing that Price and this paralytic man and we desire happens through a kind of fixing. What we want is to get back to what we used to have. We want to take the past and pull it into the present.

But forgiveness isn't just about restoring what used to be – though that is surely part of it! The power of forgiveness is in its ability to create something that wasn't there before.

Maybe you've experienced this. Think about your first big fight with someone important in your life – a dear friend, a mentor, or a significant other. Your first *real* fight, when things got *bad*, and you may have said or done something that wasn't easy to unsay or undo. Perhaps you even feared the relationship was over. But it wasn't. And when you had finally forgiven each other for what you said or didn't say, what you did or didn't do, and decided to work things through, perhaps you looked around and found yourself saying, *Oh, there's something new in this relationship* – a depth, a stability, maybe even a joy – that wasn't there before. You see, forgiveness can take a bad situation and make a good that wasn't there before; it's because you had the fight that you now know how much the other person cares, and how much *you* care, and that gives the relationship a quality that it didn't have before. And once you have it, you realize *how much better* your life is because you've got someone in it who is willing to work through the really tough stuff with you.

And it seems to me this is important because, when Jesus tells us our sins are forgiven, what Jesus is offering us is precisely this sort of relationship with God.

Whatever you have done to distance yourself from God, whatever you think you are that God could never love – it's all gone. Washed completely away. The immortal, invisible God who loved you into being, the unquenchable source of all life and hope and love, is with you through every day of your life, is working for your good, and will never, *never* give up until you reach the joy

that has been prepared for you since before the foundations of the world were laid.

Doesn't that sound like the kind of relationship that you might really want? Doesn't that sound like the kind of relationship that might make your life better? And doesn't that sound like the kind of relationship that might help you get through even the most painful and difficult days of your life?

Because, after all, we know that our journeys of healing don't always come to as sudden and miraculous a conclusion as they did for Price and for the paralytic. Oftentimes the process of healing is much slower and more gradual. Sometimes, it's not a journey we get to see very much of, this side of eternity.

But maybe, if we can see the sort of relationship that Jesus is offering to us when he says, "Your sins are forgiven," we can begin to see how God might be offering us the strength for all our journeys, no matter how long they take. And maybe, if we can find that strength, then when we hear that offer of forgiveness, we can take a long breath and say, "Thank God. That was the first thing I needed."

Amen.

**Award Winning Sermons from the 2017 Sermon  
Challenge  
Conducted by the Office of the Science, Theology and  
Region,  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Award Winning Sermons from the  
2017 PLPIT.com Sermon Challenge conducted by the  
Office for Science, Theology, and Religion Initiatives  
at Fuller Theological Seminary**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place Sermon Award Winner**

**Walk It Out—Living Faith in Everyday Life  
Forgiveness  
Charity Sandstrom  
First Friends Church of Emporia, KS**

Colossians 3:12 “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

We know that Jesus condensed every command in scripture into this one: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then he added “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He also told his disciples that people would know who their rabbi was, who they followed and called master, by their love for one another.

I would say that we can safely assume that people will either be interested in our faith based on how well we love those who are not a part of our family groups, our church body, people who are different from us. In the next few weeks we will be looking at how we can live out our faith step by step in our daily lives, and how we can make a difference in our world by how we live.

In 2006, the American Psychological Association presented a workshop to the UN on a vital topic. This is something pointed to as essential in maintaining relationships both on a personal level, community level, even on an international level. This topic was touted to do all kinds of things for individuals and families including:

- improve physical and mental health
- restore a victim's sense of personal power
- help bring about reconciliation
- promotes hope for the resolution of real-world intergroup conflicts

This is the topic we are diving into this morning, let's talk about this amazing thing vital to building and maintaining any relationship: Forgiveness.

The world needs forgiveness. Our marriages need forgiveness. Our families need forgiveness. Our communities need forgiveness. And as Christians, we have an entire faith system that is built on forgiveness and grace. What a difference we could make in our world if we would embrace this teaching of Christ, put it into practice and model it for our communities!

We don't always get it right, though, right? I don't always get it right. I love to be forgiven. I love the experience of reconciliation, the burden that lifts when I know my relationships are at peace. But I am not always good at walking through the reconciliation process. And I have a feeling that I am not alone.

Why should we care about forgiveness as Christians? I know I already mentioned that it is something the world needs, but how does it affect us, because it is important for us to know that forgiveness isn't just about other people. We know we are commanded to forgive. Jesus said that if we are offering our gift at the altar, we should stop if we know someone else has something against us and go make amends. (Mt. 5:23-25) We know that Jesus said that if we stand up to pray and we have something against someone else we should forgive so that we will be forgiven. (Mk. 11:25) In the Lord's Prayer recorded in Matthew 6, Jesus says that if we don't forgive we won't be forgiven. (Mt. 6:14-15) And if we need a really good reason to see the way others offend us in perspective, remember that when Jesus was nailed to a cross he called for God to forgive the men who pounded the nails through his flesh. (Lk 23:34)

As Christians, we forgive because God forgave us. We can pour out grace because we know grace has been lavished on us without measure.

What does it look like to forgive?

If you were like me, growing up I argued with my brother and sister. When we would really get into it, my mom would stop us and make us apologize and forgive. It went something like this, “I’m sorry.” “You’re forgiven.” It was a good try, and it certainly instilled in us the pattern that we should apologize and forgive, but sometimes we find ourselves in adulthood with little other preparation for actual real world reconciliation than our childhood forced apologies.

Aaron Lazare gives a whole system of apologizing, defining what is absolutely necessary as component parts of an apology. Christine Carter condenses this system down to 3 parts:

1. Tell them how you feel.
2. Admit your mistake and the negative impact it had.
3. Make the situation right.

How are we doing with that? When we apologize do we take full responsibility for what we have done or do we blame the other person? Do we say, “I am so sorry for hurting you?” I realize that what I did offended you, even though that was not my intention. What can I do to make it right?” Or are we saying, “I’m sorry you feel that way. I certainly never intended for you to be offended. I hope you can get over it?”

If we can take responsibility for our mistakes, it gives freedom for others to do the same. When we do it right in our families, we set a pattern and an example for future disagreements. When we practice good apologizing at home, it makes it easier to also apologize in the workplace or in our community relationships. We can build a culture of good apologies in our church and that culture will spill over into our community.

What about offering forgiveness to others?

When was the last time someone offended you personally? Last month? Last week? Earlier today? We live in a world with people who are far from perfect, people who make mistakes and their choices can hurt us deeply. So how quickly were you able to forgive? Or have you forgiven yet?

Some things are easy to forgive. If someone bumps into you in the grocery store, it's not something you carry with you for weeks. If everything else in your life is going well, forgiveness may come easier even for bigger things. But if you are having a bad time and someone does something to hurt you, even a small thing can become a huge obstacle.

Do you know that Stanford University has a whole project dedicated to helping people forgive? It's true. Stanford Forgiveness Projects: [www.learningtoforgive.com](http://www.learningtoforgive.com)

They take people and over a 6 week period teach them to forgive. Here are their steps to forgiveness:

1. Define the offense clearly, and talk about it with a trusted friend.
2. Make a commitment to forgive, even if you never are able to confront the offender and they never apologize.
3. Define forgiveness as seeking peace, not excusing the other person's behavior but setting aside blame as unhelpful and changing your story.
4. Recognizing the cause of your pain is your own thoughts, the story you tell yourself about what happened.
5. Letting go of a desire to control, knowing that others are not able to meet all of our needs.
6. Putting your energy into finding other ways of fulfilling your needs and living a fulfilled life.

Offering forgiveness, either to someone we are in relationship with every day or someone who has hurt us in the distant past, can be difficult. Sometimes it isn't enough to say we forgive. Sometimes we have to forgive every day. Sometimes we have to forgive every few hours or even more often. It helps to walk through steps like these to reframe our way of thinking. And when we forgive, we know it doesn't just set the other person free, it liberates us as well. As Christians we know that God is the just judge and we can let go of our need to judge and punish others.

I find it very interesting that these studies are pointing back to the truths we find in the Bible and in the teachings of Jesus. It's amazing that the UN recognizes the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in order to have a

more peaceful world. What would it look like if you and I made forgiveness a priority in a world that is waking up to the need for reconciliation?

What would it look like if the Church around the world practiced forgiveness as a beacon of Grace to their communities?

Imagine with me the hope and renewal we could experience if forgiveness wasn't just a topic of study, but the marker of disciples of Jesus as we walk through this world sharing Christ's love.

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**Charity Sandstrom** has served the past 11 years as pastor of the First Friends Church of Emporia, KS (EFC-MAYM). She loves walking through life with Richard, her husband of 19 years. Parenting a teen, a tween and a kindergartener fills every corner of their lives with excitement. Fueled by a love of Jesus, and lots of coffee, Charity lives each day to love those God brings across her path. "I want every person to know that God is closer than they think and loves them more than they could possibly imagine."

**What inspired you to write this winning sermon?**

Forgiveness is a key component of our faith and such an important pathway for moving forward in life. Without forgiveness lived out in our everyday existence, we get stuck. We all need forgiveness and we all need to practice forgiving others. Forgiveness brings freedom. I know what it is like both to hold a grudge against other people and to struggle forgiving myself, often for things that do not matter. Learning to forgive and receive forgiveness has set me free. I want others to know the same freedom through receiving God's forgiveness, forgiving themselves, learning to apologize well and forgive others.

**What helpful personal hints can you share for preparing a sermon?**

Sermon-writing requires some basic commitments from each of us. Information from the Bible, life experience, and other sources forms the foundation. Application of the information in our lives shows us how to build on that foundation with practical steps. Motivation to build, to incorporate the application into our lives, or the "so what?" of the message makes the difference between information received and lives transformed by the message of the Gospel. God desires to make all things new, building new lives on a solid foundation. If we fail to paint a compelling picture of that new life we cannot expect those who listen to embrace the truth we proclaim.

## To be formatted and bio Added.

### “FORGIVENESS & THE WEIGHT OF GRUDGES”

**KEY SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 50:15-21<sup>NIV</sup>**

**[BRANDON PENN, ASSOCIATE PASTOR AT BETHANY CHURCH IN WEST COVINA, CA]**

*Each person in the audience was provided a link to the primary scientific article used in this sermon:*

- Joanna McParland. *How Grudges Hurt Your Health* (2016).  
[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_grudges\\_hurt\\_your\\_health](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_grudges_hurt_your_health)

*Additional articles were provided on the topic for further reading, which all in all, cover the scientific references and claims made in this sermon:*

- Linda Graham. *How to Overcome Barriers to Forgiveness* (2014).  
[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/overcome\\_barriers\\_forgiveness](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/overcome_barriers_forgiveness)
- Everett Worthington Jr. *The New Science of Forgiveness* (2004).  
[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_new\\_science\\_of\\_forgiveness](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_new_science_of_forgiveness)

This morning were going to be exploring the topic of Forgiveness. As I say that, I imagine many are already thinking, “I have heard messages on forgiveness from many Pastors, I pretty much already know where you going with this”. While you might be familiar with the topic, God has something to say to each of us this morning that’s a timely word & a *rhema* word.

What if I told you that this topic of forgiveness actually affects your health? ...That this topic of forgiveness can impact our sickness and disease? This morning we’re going to be talking about forgiveness because it has major implications for human life. Not only Christians, but all people. We’re going to spend time in Genesis. We’ll actually be reading a short passage from Genesis 50.

We’re picking up with Joseph. Some of us are familiar with Joseph, who was once a young 17-year-old kid with lots of older brothers at the time. His older brothers grew jealous of Joseph because of dreams and visions that seemed to place Joseph in charge of his brothers and even his father Jacob (also called Israel). Out of jealousy, his brothers began a plot to take Joseph’s life. However, instead of killing Joseph, his brothers sold him to Midianite merchants – thus placing Joseph in the [human] trafficking ring. They trafficked their youngest brother. Joseph ended up in Egypt as a servant in Potiphar’s house. Nearly 25 years pass whereby Joseph is freed from the trafficking ring and occupies the second highest rank in Egypt. God showed Joseph favor. One day while Joseph is governing the affairs of Egypt, his brothers - the same brothers who trafficked him years prior - travel to Egypt because they are experiencing famine in their own land. It’s against this backdrop of hurt and betrayal that we pick up in Genesis 50:

<sup>15</sup>Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” <sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your

brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.”<sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Point #1: The question this morning is this: What grudges might you hold today?

What grudges in this very hour might you be holding? Grudges are often quiet ways we try to get back at people – even though they almost never work. Often, carrying grudges don’t pan out the way we intend. Therefore holding grudges rarely makes things better. Instead of hurting our offenders, grudges often hurt us the most.

Historically, forgiveness has been a topic consigned to the Church. In recent years, however, the scientific study of forgiveness has increased. Hear some of the latest scientific voice on the topic:

*In recent years, researchers have shown that carrying a sense of injustice or unfairness about something, particularly over a prolonged period, can have an adverse effect on our health. In particular, it can make painful conditions worse. (Dr. Joanna McParland, Glasgow Caledonian University)*

In short: Holding grudges makes pain worse. *(sub-point)*

To help illustrate this point I need a volunteer.

### **[BEGIN ILLUSTRATION]**

[Context of Illustration: The volunteer selected is named Kory, who is a former NFL linebacker. Kory is given an empty satchel to place on his shoulder, where inside he must place fist-size rocks as a physical representation for the weight of grudges and our tendency to unnecessarily hold on to them. Kory must add a rock to his satchel after hearing each ‘grudge he held onto from his week’.

The examples of grudges are:

1. Stranger nudges you while walking in public
2. Car rear-ends you
3. Car cuts you off on the freeway
4. Associate Pastor says something inappropriate
5. A friend lies on you
6. A co-worker lies on you
7. Missed out on a promotion
8. Treated poorly by someone you love
9. Someone has fallen out of your graces for whatever reason

After adding all the weight to his satchel, Kory will then rest the hand from his opposite arm inside a stainless steel bucket of ice water, which represents the frequent experience of life’s pain and stressors. He mustn’t remove his hand from the water until the illustration is completed. While physically experiencing

the pain and discomfort from the rocks and ice water, Kory is asked to process aloud the effects of pain and discomfort in his body. The objective is to exemplify how the discomfort from the weight of rocks (grudges) intensifies the level of discomfort caused by the ice water (routine troubles of life, *John 16:33*).

[END ILLUSTRATION]<sup>1</sup>

You see, this is what the research points out concerning grudges: holding grudges intensifies the pain we experience amidst life's regular routines. Grudges make pain worse.

Moreover, carrying grudges impacts how we show up in relationships. Grudges impact our *presence*. And then we wonder sometimes why we're experiencing relational breakdowns. *What grudges might you be carrying this morning that you are unwilling to let go?* Research from the science of forgiveness indicates that when life is hard, holding grudges will make life harder.

So then what shall we do with the grudges? I call your attention to Romans 12:

**<sup>19</sup>Again, my loved ones, do not seek revenge; instead, allow God's wrath to make sure justice is served. Turn it over to Him. For the Scriptures say, "Revenge is Mine. I will settle all scores." <sup>20</sup>But consider this bit of wisdom: "If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink; because if you treat him kindly, it will be like heaping hot coals on top of his head." ROMANS 12:19-20<sup>VOICE</sup>**

So often we are busy carrying the weight of grudges and left wondering why relationships aren't working, or left wondering why our bodies might be experiencing pain. Grudges, however, can short-circuit the way God seeks to bless our lives, relationships, and bodies.

God says, "vengeance is Mine". What does it look like for you to give your grudges to the Lord?

Point #2: The strongest remedy to holding grudges is – forgiveness. The Bible and science both show that forgiveness improves your quality of life. It's not only God's Word that makes this point, but scientific research also illustrates this point. The longer we hold grudges and the more unwilling we are to forgive, the more this will negatively impact our quality of life. We must trust in God as judge. Brothers and sisters, this is why forgiveness is a critical part to life. *This* is the function of forgiveness. The function of forgiveness restores relationships. Forgiveness restores human flourishing.

So many of us are walking around right now with rocks on our shoulders – so much weight. We become subconscious about the grudges we're carrying for the person we haven't forgiven, and we don't realize the weight is causing us to slow in progress. Grudges impact our quality of life.

The function of forgiveness is to restore our flourishing, to free us, to allow us to move again. Look at verse 15:

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration inspired in part by a scientific method used to measure people's pain thresholds.

**<sup>15</sup>Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" (Genesis 50:15<sup>NIV</sup>)**

Joseph's brothers may be giving insight into Joseph's spiritual and emotional state. Let's consider for a moment: Joseph may have been carrying grudges against his brothers, for which he needed to let go. However, what shall we conclude if his brothers are mistaken and Joseph isn't holding any grudges? What might this verse reveal about the brothers?

The verse appears to be a statement of guilt; and guilt is a painful internal alarm that awakens us to the fact that we have sinned. Though uncomfortable, guilt is a distress signal for us, which warns us when something is wrong. Joseph's brothers make a comment of guilt because they are concerned that their destructive behavior may have consequences. The brothers are worried – sitting on the edge of their seats. Joseph sits in a position of Egyptian government where he has the power to dish out serious payback [revenge]. As an aside, Genesis 50 and previous chapters don't make it clear that the brothers even confessed to what they did to Joseph! So his brothers are potentially carrying around guilt, which is causing them to doubt Joseph's forgiveness – preventing family flourishing.

Perhaps this morning you identify most closely with Joseph – as someone who is carrying a grudge?  
Perhaps this morning you identify most closely with Joseph's brothers – feeling guilt about how you've offended someone close to you or someone that you love?

But more troubling than guilt itself, is becoming numb to guilt. God calls us to face our guilt, to acknowledge our failures. And why? So that we might know what it means to accept help and receive the forgiveness offered to us in Christ. So often when we read the Bible we prefer to be the "hero" in the story. Our lens is often bent towards the *good character*. However, scripture reminds us:

- **<sup>8</sup>If we say that we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. <sup>9</sup>But if we confess our sins to him, he can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. And it is perfectly proper for God to do this for us because Christ died to wash away our sins. 1 JOHN 1:8-9<sup>TLB</sup>**

If we see ourselves as Joseph this morning, we have work to do.  
If we see ourselves as Joseph's brothers, we have work to do.

What grudges might you be holding this morning? Each of us is being asked the question of Joseph, "Are you ready to start forgiving?"

Point #3: The next question for you is this: Are you ready to start the process of forgiveness?

We see Joseph asked this sort of question when we look at the text:

<sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please

forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” (Genesis 50:16-17<sup>NIV</sup>)

Notably, the brothers didn’t say anything indicating remorse for their offense. When we offend others, we must come to a point where we ask the offended to forgive us. We must always ***seek to live at peace with one another (Romans 12:18)***. Nonetheless, even amidst such heinous acts of treachery, Joseph forgave his brothers. Genesis 45 strongly suggests that Joseph extended forgiveness prior to hearing of his father’s death. Moreover, there was a great deal of time that passed between the moment of offense and Joseph extending forgiveness – many years in fact.

Forgiveness doesn’t always happen quickly, but it’s a process. You may wonder, *How is it that Joseph forgave his brothers in light of such betrayal?* Joseph understood something fundamental to the nature of God’s character, and it’s this: God will use the evil, the broken, and messed up things in your life, and turn them around for good. Joseph understood something about God’s providence that assured him of God’s ability to take life’s messed-up-stuff and turn it into an outcome that’s beneficial for human flourishing. Then, verse 19 calls something further to our attention:

**<sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? (Genesis 50:19<sup>NIV</sup>)**

In other words, Joseph is asking this significant question, *“Would I dare interfere with God’s plans by not forgiving you?”* Joseph came to realize that holding grudges and withholding forgiveness interferes with God’s plans.

Imagine your life with the constant presence of a referee near you. How many times would the referee throw flags in your game of life as a penalty for pass-interference? God is trying to pass something to you – wisdom, an open door, direction, or guidance – but the weight of grudges can interfere with receiving God’s passes of blessing, abundance, and flourishing. Some of us may need to call “pass interference” on ourselves this morning. Are you willing to let go of grudges this morning? Are you willing to begin the process of forgiveness – with Christ’s help?

The reason for **all** of this – the reason we must be willing to undergo transformation through forgiveness - is in verse 20:

**<sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. (Genesis 50:20<sup>NIV</sup>)**

God is willing to take life’s messiness and turn it around for our good for the purpose of not only saving ourselves, but for saving others. In light of this, the function of forgiveness is not only for your wellbeing, but for the

wellbeing of others. God wants to use our messes in life to preserve many others. Yet the more we willingly carry grudges, the more we interfere with God's intentions for others to flourish (your children, family, co-workers, local church, and your generations to come).

This morning there might be some here who no longer want to carry the unnecessary weight of grudges. Are you willing to start a journey toward forgiveness? Are you willing to start a journey where that hurt that's been steeping in the crevices of your conscience can be handed over to the Lord? Are you willing this morning to give up whatever might be hindering a deeper relationship with the Lord? As an example of how to forgive, are you willing to receive God's forgiveness of sin and brokenness? God so loves us that he gave his only Son, so that your trust in Jesus will lead into abundant living (*cf. John 3:16; John 10:10*). Will you say YES to trusting Jesus? Will you say YES to giving up your grudges?

**[END OF SERMON]**

## **Forgiveness?? Or Retribution? What Brings Peace?**

**The Rev. William Dohle**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sermon Award Winner**

St. Paul Lutheran Church in Peoria, Illinois

Let us pray: Holy God, by your Son you have taught us how to pray. You have made us bold to come to you confidently. You have lifted up the needs of the world to us. And now you invite us to pray for forgiveness. Help us do just that today, pray for forgiveness that we might forgive others as you do. Amen.

For the last two weeks, we've been talking about the Lord's Prayer and answering the question the disciples raised with Jesus. "How do we pray?" "Lord, teach us how to pray?"

We began with understanding who we are praying to. "Our Father who art in heaven." We learned, as Martin Luther tells us, that by these words God wishes to attract us so that we believe that he is our Father and we are his children so that with boldness and complete confidence we may ask him for what we need just as loving children ask their loving father.

Last week we started praying to God...for God. We asked that God's kingdom would come in and among us. We asked that his name would be holy...with us too. We asked that God's will would be done. And we know that God will already do all of these things without our prayer, but we ask them so that God would come among us. We ask them for God.

Today we are hitting at the heart of the prayer. The prayer we pray for us. "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Focusing today on that last petition. Forgive.

Of all the pieces of the Lord's Prayer that we pray each Sunday, the middle of the prayer always chokes me up a bit.

"Forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us."

It's not the forgiveness part. I know I need that. It's the part when we say "Forgive us...As we forgive those who sin against us." Those are harsh words. Think about it. When we say: "Forgive us as we forgive others." We're really saying to God, "Do to me what I do to others. Use the same measure with me, Lord, as I use with others."

That's scary. At least for me.

Forgiveness itself is a strange thing. It is one of the most used words in all of scripture. From the beginning of Genesis on, we are told of forgiveness. The forgiveness of Esau and Jacob. The forgiveness of Joseph with his brothers. David seeks forgiveness after he sins and the prophets call the people to repentance to receive forgiveness.

In the New Testament, forgiveness is all over the place. It might be said that Jesus Christ himself was crucified because he dared forgive sins. Who can forgive sins, they asked, except God alone?

We talk about it. We sing about it. We confess our sins each Sunday and pray for forgiveness before service each Sunday.

But what does forgiveness do? Why is it so important to our faith and why is it found at the heart of the Lord's prayer?

Forgiveness does many things. It eases guilt. It helps us when we feel bad about doing something. And forgiving our neighbors promises certain things too. It promises closure. It promises to give us some peace. It is essential to our relationships, both with God and with our neighbors.

But does it work? Does forgiveness actually work?

Does forgiving our neighbor deliver on the promise of closure and peace that we seek afterward? Or does forgiveness just make matters worse?

To find out these answers let's look for an event that is both tragic and evil in its character. Let's look at the Boston Marathon bombing.

On April 15, 2013, two homemade bombs were detonated on the Boston marathon route. The bombs created chaos, destruction, and death in their wake. When the man responsible for the Boston Marathon tragedy was apprehended, people rejoiced. Quickly the man responsible was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for the death he caused to others.

But would this bring peace and closure? Would others find a sense of relief at his passing?

Boston Mayor Martin Walsh seemed to think so. He went on record saying "I hope this verdict provides a small amount of closure." Another victim agreed with him saying, "The verdict, undoubtedly a difficult decision for the jury, gives me relief and closure as well as the ability to move forward."

But is Mayor Walsh right? Do victims need the death of the victimizer? Is forgiveness not enough to give peace to the victims?

Unlike the mayor, though, residents of Boston don't seem to think so. In fact, a poll done there found that only 15 percent of residents supported the death penalty for the bomber. Those opposed to it included Bill and Denise Richard, whose 8-year-old son was killed in the bombing and whose 7-year-old daughter lost her leg.

So does retributive justice give peace to the victims or not?

The Bible clearly says, "No!" But what does science say? Does scientific research support the Bible's call to forgive or society's push to destroy?

Here science clearly supports forgiveness.

Scientific research has proven in study after study that retributive justice which is the eye-for-an-eye logic where wrongs are returned for wrongs,

brings no peace to the victims. In 2008 study the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology tested revenge. They found that, although people expected they would feel better after exacting revenge, they did not. In fact, their happiness dropped when they themselves punished others. It didn't fall when others punished them for them, but in neither case were the victims happier after the crime was punished than they were before.

Another study, done in 2007, revealed the same thing. Here they analyzed media interviews with family and friends of murder victims whose victimizer was executed. They discovered that only 15% of the 150 cases reported experiencing peace or relief in their public statements. And 2.5% said it gave them closure. By contrast, 20% of them explicitly said the execution brought them no healing or closure.

So what does the science prove? Namely what the scripture has taught us all along.

Nothing brings peace except forgiveness.

There's a reason why Jesus gives forgiveness left and right in the Gospels. Why so much of his teaching too has to do with sharing forgiveness with our neighbors. Forgiveness works! Forgiving our neighbor brings peace and closure. True, the relationship may never be the same. An abused wife who forgives her abuser may never return to her husband again, but forgiveness can help her move on with her life, closing the book on a painful chapter of her life and opening her to new possibilities.

Thus we return to this incredibly difficult petition at the heart of the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgive us, give us peace, as we give forgive and give peace to others. Jesus says the same thing in the Gospel of Matthew, "Unless you forgive others neither will your father forgive your trespasses." So why is God's forgiveness withheld when we fail to forgive others? Why is we asking God to treat us as we treat our neighbors?

We may think Jesus is being harsh here, but Jesus is really describing what we heard science has confirmed. Peace can only come through forgiveness. God's forgiveness of us in Jesus brings peace with God and our forgiveness of others brings peace between us and our neighbor. If the goal is peace, the peace that comes through forgiveness, then forgiveness must be in everything we do. We must receive forgiveness from God but we must not hoard it but share it with those who wrong us as well.

Our goal is peace.

And if the goal is peace, retribution doesn't work. If the goal is peace, then resentment must fall. If the goal is peace, the only way forward is through forgiveness. Vengeance must return to God to whom it belongs. We must put aside our ideas of retributive justice, an eye for an eye, which as Gandi rightly points out, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." We must set this aside and forgive is we want peace. For peace comes comes in the way that God came to us. On the wings of forgiveness with compassion as our guiding light.

I heard of a woman once who struggled with that, whose story became my guiding light. Tragedy had struck her family. Her son had been brutally killed. The murderer was found and once found a confession was given.

“I did it,” he said. “And I’m sorry.”

At first this didn’t sit right with the woman. Not at all. In fact, she was speaking with the DA about the death penalty. Then, one night she says she had a dream. In the dream she saw her son standing by the foot of her bed. He was telling her, “Mom! Why are you hurting me?”

The woman cried out in her dream, “I’m not hurting you. I’m punishing the person who hurt you.”

Her son smiled. “But mom, I’ve forgiven them. I’ve let it go. And so must you. If you don’t forgive them, you’ll be losing me all over again.”

After the woman woke up, everything changed. She went at once to the lawyer and pleaded for her son’s murderer. She met with him in prison and spoke to him and got to know him. She heard the other side of the story. From those meetings she started to know her son’s murderer and understand who he was. She went to the DA and changed her plea, asking him to save the young man’s life and not destroy it. After he was sentenced, she continued this relationship with him. After he was released from prison, she took him into her home and helped him get back on his feet. He calls her his angel...and his adopted mother. All because she forgave him. All because she chose peace.

God has forgiven our sins. God doesn’t hold our sins against us. Maybe because God knows what scientific research is discovering. If the goal is peace. If closure is what we want. If we want to move on, the only way we can do is let it go. Forgiving others we find the peace that God promises as he forgives us and through mutual forgiveness we may find peace. Amen.

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**Rev. William (Bill) Dohle** serves as pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Peoria, Illinois. He graduated from California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota with a Master of Divinity degree. Bill has been in ministry as a pastor for seventeen years, serving congregations in Southern California, Colorado, Montana, and now Illinois. He is a published author and playwright, writing devotions for *The Word in Season* and plays through Contemporary Drama Service. He is the husband of a preschool teacher and the father of two high schoolers, a middle schooler, and a preschooler. When Bill is not chasing after his children, he enjoys reading science fiction, writing plays and fiction, and camping, especially in the mountains.

**What inspired you to write this winning sermon?**

Recently the cry for revenge and retribution has been overwhelming. More and more, people are finding forgiveness an impossible goal. With riots breaking out in St. Louis and marches and counter-marches springing up around the country, we need ask ourselves what is our goal. If our goal is peace, we cannot follow our instincts and seek retribution. We must work for reconciliation through forgiveness. I was surprised to find how science affirms what we have always said as people of faith. Retribution does nothing but make people worse. We must learn to forgive.

**What helpful personal hints can you share for preparing a sermon?**

Don't talk over their heads. Don't assume they have as much interest or knowledge of the subject or text as you do. Don't assume they all have a college education and can understand every word you say. They don't care about Greek nor do they care what it meant to people long ago. They care about now. Explain things basically. Think of how Jesus taught the crowds. He used parables and stories to teach them about the kingdom of God. Dive into those stories in a way that invites others into it as well. And laugh! Find the divine humor in the text if there is some. People remember what they can laugh about.

Do speak clearly the good news of God and repeat your message over and over again. There's a reason in school the basic subjects repeat the basics every single year. People forget. Throw out your three-point sermon outline and focus on the ONE point you want everyone to get as they leave. What ONE thing do you want them to understand? Now repeat one thing over and over again in new and exciting ways so that by the end your people can give your sermon for you.

## **Comments from Seminarians and Priests Attending PEP and PEP II 2017**

PEP provides students with time to simply focus on preaching. That is a gift. The added bonus is the interaction with staff and students from throughout the country. We learn from each other.

The small group work was very valuable. I really enjoyed meeting peers from across the Episcopal Church. The faculty mentors were wonderful.

I enjoyed focusing on the mechanics of preaching.

The events and the way they were programmed were just right.

The leaders, plenary sessions and preaching were exactly what I had hoped for.

The Rev. Dr. Micah Jackson had us each do an instant sermon. Wow - who knew that it would be possible. It is.

I came away with practical advice and tools

The Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry's visit and all my interaction with the preaching faculty were excellent!

The Instant Preaching exercise greatly increased my self-confidence.

A great deal was accomplished in a short period of time.

The best part of PEP was the interaction with leaders and colleagues; shared worship and hearing many styles of preaching.

The opportunity to meet so many wonderful faculty and fellow students was priceless!

The Very Rev. Will Mebane said good things. Hard things, but damn good things that need to be said [in the workshop *Preaching the Gospel Without Politics*.] Importantly, he empowered us to say those things too.

I think the whole program comes together as one major event that has impacted me for my future ministry.

The faculty were excellent and really are the backbone of the quality of this experience.

I have already put the skills we practiced to use in my summer internship. [In the *Instant Preaching* session] I was just so happy to have done it once in the "safety" of a learning environment.

PEP has a great reputation and tradition. I am already looking forward to attending PEP II after I have been in a ministry context for several years.



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