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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 17, Series A (Pentecost 13)
Saturday, September 2nd, 2017
Sunday, September 3rd, 2017

Sermon: Trying to Forgive
Text: Romans 12:9-20

Focus: Jesus died for us and forgave us even though we don't deserve it.

Function: That they would love and pray for those who wrong them.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "...We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us" (SC, 5th Petition of Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. In his popular book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis quips, "Everyone thinks that forgiveness is a wonderful idea until they have something to forgive...." We may chuckle at Lewis's wry humor, but part of that laughter is the uncomfortable deflection of our consciences, which accuse us for our own un-grace towards those who have wronged us. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us*" (cf. Matt. 6:12). In other words: Lord, forgive me *in exactly the same way* that I forgive other people. Now *that* is a scary prayer. And if you don't think so, then obviously you have never struggled to forgive someone, as I have. But if you are the victim of abusive by your parents or spouse, if you are divorced, if you fought in a war, if you have ever been fired from a job, if you are a refugee from a church divided by conflict, or you lost everything because of someone else's negligence or malice, then you know *exactly* what I'm talking about.

Forgiveness isn't easy. It doesn't happen overnight. You don't just say, "I forgive you" and get on with life as if nothing ever happened. Our heads and hearts do not permit us to operate that way. We are fallen, sinful creatures, after all, and our hearts still hurt even after the

forgiveness begins. I often hear people say, “I forgive, but I won’t forget.” Only God is fully capable of doing that. For, as he spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34b).

Someone in my life deeply hurt me and my family by abuse, adultery, and deception. It’s not easy to forgive a person like that. Sometimes you wish that God would strike them dead or damn them straight to hell. And why not? Plenty of people in the Bible prayed and wished for things like that to happen to their enemies, including King David and many of the Psalmists. So yes, even pastors who preach forgiveness are human beings who struggle with broken hearts and a desire for justice. Besides, if I said that I don’t struggle to forgive other people, would you believe me anyway? Probably not.

As sinners, we are prone to a kind of self-righteousness when we believe we are victims. We long for revenge against those who wrong us. We’d rather get “even Steven” than to make amends. Revenge drives the plots of some of the world’s greatest literature and dramas, from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (Volumes 1 and 2, of course!). I recently read a powerful revenge story called *The Revenant* by Michael Punke. *The Revenant* is a novel based on the true story of Hugh Glass, a fur trapper on the Missouri River during the 1820s. On an expedition with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, Glass gets attacked and badly mauled by a bear. His fellow trappers leave him for dead, and two of them steal his rifle and knife, leaving him utterly defenseless against animals and hostile Indians. Miraculously, Glass survives the attack and sets out across the uncharted Louisiana Territory to track down his betrayers and kill them. He crawls for miles through rivers and forests until he can walk again. Unfortunately, Glass never gets his revenge. He finds both thieves, the boy Jim Bridger and the gambler,

Private Fitzgerald. But he doesn't get a chance to kill them, for reasons I can't disclose without spoiling the story for you.

Even though *The Revenant* is a fascinating adventure story and moving tale, it leaves the reader quite unsatisfied because the bloodlust for revenge is not fulfilled. And yet the author foreshadows this possibility with his epigrammatic quotation from Romans 12: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19).

Christians are called to trust God and let him handle things. Let *God* sort out the wicked from the righteous instead of doing it yourself. Even though we may rightly desire revenge or justice (or whatever you call it), the uncomfortable reality is that Jesus *does* expect us to forgive people who sin against us. As my friend, Pastor Michael Eckelkamp, likes to say, "It is better to be righteous than to be right." It is better to be righteous than to be right.

That's why the Apostle Paul, speaking by divine authority, piles it on thick with his very specific instructions about how to love and forgive people in Romans 12. He commands such unbelievable feats as outdoing one another in showing honor (Rom. 12:10b), blessing those who persecute you (v. 14), repaying nobody evil for evil (v. 17), feeding our enemies when they are hungry (v. 20), and leaving everything to God's judgment and wrath instead of taking matters into our own hands and seeking revenge (v. 19). Paul sums it up by saying, "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:20, ESV).¹

Author Anne Lamott wrote about how hard it was to forgive her alcoholic mother even after she died. Anne writes, "I've spent my whole life trying to get over having had Nikki for a mother.... I prayed to forgive her..., but she was like someone who had broken my leg, and my

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

leg had healed badly, and I would limp forever.”² As a Christian, Anne knew that she was supposed to forgive her mother. But it took years and years of prayer before she could begin to forgive her dead mother.

Maybe you have loved and hated someone like that: a parent, a spouse, a child, a brother or sister, a boss, even a pastor or priest. You know that you’re supposed to love your enemies and pray for them, as Jesus instructs in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:44). You know that a “good Christian” (whatever that means!) is supposed to do all the nice things Paul lists in our epistle lesson. You hate the way that bitterness poisons your soul and seeps into all your other relationships, making them just a little bit toxic. And you want it to stop. But you don’t know how. Are you just supposed to fake it to make it? Or end up angry, bitter, alone—and damned—if you can’t?

“This is hard,” writes C.S. Lewis. (Talk about an *understatement!*) “It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of everyday life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it?”³ It’s a good question, don’t you think? Lewis answers that we can only begin to forgive the unforgiveable “by remembering where we stand.”⁴

And where do we stand? At the foot of the cross as unforgiveable, undeserving, even—at times—unrepentant, repugnant sinners. As Luther writes, “We daily sin much” (SC, 5th Petition of the Lord’s Prayer). “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). None of us does what is right, not even one. And yet God in his great mercy still *has* mercy on

² Anne Lamott, “O Noraht, Noraht,” in *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 47.

³ C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962, 1965), 125.

⁴ Lewis, 125.

us, forgiving our sins, washing us in the waters of Baptism and the blood of Jesus, and giving us the promise of eternal life despite all that we have done to muck it up.

Isn't that what Jesus did when he stretched out his arms on the cross, willingly dying the death that we deserve, taking the punishment for *our sins*, and looking with pity and love at his enemies? From the cross Jesus beheld the Roman soldiers gambling for his clothes, the Jewish priests mocking him, and the stark absence of any of his disciples except for his mother and the Apostle John. And yet Jesus heartily prayed for them, not once, but over and over again, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).⁵ And so God the Father accepted the prayer of the holy, innocent Son of God and forgave our sins—yours, mine, and the sins of the people we don't want to forgive.

"Father, forgive them..." Jesus had to say it more than once. So do we. Sometimes the only way to try to forgive someone is to pray for them, to lift them up to the Lord in prayer and wish them well. Ask God to bring them to repentance and salvation. Ask him to protect their property and health and marriage. And ask God to change *my* heart too, so that I can love and forgive them. Chances are that you will have to pray this more than once. Forgiveness is hard work. It can take a long time. But it's worth it. You will benefit as much by forgiving others as they will by receiving it. After all, as Anne Lamott says in another place, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."⁶ How's that working out for you?!

I need to make a special point. Not every enemy you have will want to reconcile with you. Not every person whose sin you confront will be willing to apologize. Some people may even be outright offended by the suggestion that there is a need for forgiveness. After all,

⁵ The Greek verb *elegen* is imperfect, not simple aorist (*eipen*), indicating repeated action.

⁶ Lamott, "Forgiveness," *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 134.

forgiveness is not the same thing as making excuses for sin. Forgiveness means calling sin “sin” and yet making a conscious decision not to hold it against the other person anymore. But it doesn’t mean that they have to be your best friend, or that you have to become a doormat to welcome more abuse. God takes sin very seriously, so seriously, in fact, that he sent his only begotten Son to die on the cross to take away our sins. Yet even Jesus tells us to treat someone like a pagan or a tax collector if they will not repent of their sins (Matt. 18:27).

To put it bluntly, sometimes you need to get out of a relationship to protect yourself and your family. In the case of physical or sexual abuse, it may be to protect life and limb. In the case of emotional abuse or spiritual tyranny, it is to save your soul. If you or your children are in danger, get out!

“If possible,” Paul writes in Romans 12, “so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). *So far as it depends on you!* You cannot force someone to make peace with you. If you are for peace, but they are for war, what more can be done but to pray (cf. Ps. 120:7). And I know just what to pray: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And Father, forgive *me* too! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.