

Delivered April 11, 2010  
Forgiveness  
John 20:19-23

“If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Christ’s resurrection means many different things to people, of course—Christ’s victory over death—Christ’s reconciliation of the world to God—the in-breaking of a new creation—in which love, justice, and non-violence enter the world as distinct possibilities for the future of humanity-- but forgiveness of sins is right up there near the top of the list with the rest of these interpretations. That’s one of John’s primary understandings of Jesus’ resurrection, in fact: Christ is the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world—John says that in the very first chapter of his book and he returns to this theme of forgiveness over and over again.

Christianity, though, is not the only religion that espouses forgiveness as a way of living a moral and spiritual life. Before we talk about Christian forgiveness I thought it might be interesting to explore how other religions conceive of forgiveness. I’m going into areas I know little about, so tell me after the service if I’m wrong here; but as I understand it, Buddhists really don’t believe in sin. A Buddhist would say that the wrongs that we commit are just steps in our growth process. The person we are today is not the person we were yesterday or the person we will be tomorrow. Following that line of reasoning, the person who committed sin yesterday, no longer exists; Guilt is a frivolous emotion as are anger, resentment, and the will to seek vengeance. “Remembering a wrong is like carrying a burden in the mind,” says Buddha. Dwelling on the past keeps you from living fully in the present. So forgiveness to a Buddhist simply means letting go of your burdens. It is a head thing.

Whether right or wrong, we who are people of the book, though—Muslims, Jews and Christians DO have a concept of sin that is as old as creation itself—dating back to Adam and Eve. As appealing as the Buddhist view may be, it would be very difficult if not impossible for us to adopt it—at this stage of our lives. Sin is basic to our world view, isn’t it? Our response to Buddhism is that we do not always live in present tenses—we have roots—we are the people we are today because of what has gone before in our lives—it is right to look to the past and try to make amends; and to structure our lives in such a way that we do not repeat past mistakes. Furthermore even in those instances when it is best to let go of burdens, it’s certainly not so easy as Buddha seems to imply.

The Muslim faith, of course, is one of the religions of the book—and by “the book” I mean not just our Bible but also the Koran. The Muslim faith IS rooted in the past, therefore Muslims have a strong concept and appreciation of sin. A good Muslim would tell you that forgiveness is more than just a head thing. Achieving forgiveness requires action, too. The Muslims have a well-thought-out step-by-step process for forgiveness, which is action oriented: 1) Admit the sin; 2) Commit yourself to not repeating the offense; 3) Ask forgiveness of the injured party and make amends as best you can; 4) Ask forgiveness of God. Nothing wrong with that. Sounds like a good plan, right? And

it's also right in line with Jewish and Christian thought on the subject, which we would expect it to—since the Muslim faith is based on Judaism and borrows from Christianity.

And now we come to the Jews. The Jews, and here I am talking about the Jews of the Old Testament, were very preoccupied with the notion of sin and forgiveness. They often understood their current misery as God's punishment for past sins. We might say that much of their theology was cause and effect with them. So, for instance, when the Assyrians invaded Israel, and when the Jews were exiled to Babylon, these were brought about by God as punishment for idolatry. It follows then, that many of the Jews' petitions to God were pleas for forgiveness so that their status as covenantal partner with God could be restored. In fact, the Psalms are rife with the theme of forgiveness—Psalm 25 for instance: "Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins." Or Psalm 85, "O Lord, you forgave the iniquity of your people, you pardoned all their sin."

And that brings us to Christianity. Christians, of course, inherited the theological concepts of the Jews in regard to sin and forgiveness but with several important twists. For one thing, Jesus asks US to forgive each other as well as asking forgiveness of God. This asking and receiving forgiveness from others are not just ways to smooth relations in society—Jesus gives forgiveness of each other divine status. "Do it because God wants you to." That in itself is a huge leap from Judaism, but there are several other notions of forgiveness that seem to have originated with Jesus which are equally important for our discussion for today.

1) In Matthew 18:23-34 we read the parable of the servant whose master forgives a huge debt. The servant though, later refuses to forgive his fellow servant a little debt. When the master learns of the servant's ungenerous, unforgiving ways, he sends the servant to prison. In other words, God's forgiveness of us, is conditional on our forgiveness of each other. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." One way to interpret that line from the Lord's prayer is, "Because we forgive our debtors, we know that you (God) will forgive OUR debts." You remember the tragic killing of 6 girls in an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 2006? The Amish community's response of forgiveness and reconciliation was widely discussed in the national media at that time. The reason that the Amish were so quick to forgive is because they have adopted this idea, that God will not forgive them, unless they forgive others. That same concept is embraced by Nelson Mandela, who played such an instrumental role in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Project. He has a wonderful line that goes like this: "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and then waiting for your enemy to die."

Second on our list of notions of forgiveness that seem to have originated with Jesus: Forgiveness should not be conditional on the other's admission of guilt, or the other's apology. This is a hard pill to swallow definitely. We want the one who has caused us grief to squirm a little—to feel remorse, a little. But that is not Jesus' way. The Bible story that comes to mind is of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus disperses the crowd with a pithy, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Once he and the woman are all alone, Jesus says, "I don't condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again." In other words, Jesus' forgiveness precedes the woman's turning from sin—if, in fact, there ever IS a turning from sin. For all we know a

few hours later the woman and her lover picked up where they left off earlier. And of course, Jesus says from the cross, “God forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus forgave his tormentors even though they were still up to their eyebrows in deep, deep sin and didn’t even know it.

3) Three-- and this is the last point in our series of three notions of forgiveness which seem to have originated with Jesus-- three, as Jesus says in our passage for today: “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven.” I am reminded that Roman Catholics base their sacrament of penance on this passage. “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven” has been interpreted by Catholics to mean that priests have the right to forgive sins **on behalf of God**. And if you think that is presumptuous, think about this. Luther and Calvin, believing as they did in the priesthood of all believers, took this line of scripture to mean that each of us, whether or not a priest or a pastor, or even an ordained elder, is able to stand in for God and forgive each other our sins. That’s even more than presumptuous—that almost sounds heretical, doesn’t it?

That’s only half the line though. The other half of the line is this: If you retain the sins of any they are retained.” I take this to mean, that if we DO NOT forgive the sins of another then there may be life long, no, I take that back, there may even be ETERNAL consequences. “If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Do we really have that kind of divine power? Do we really want that kind of divine power?

This week as I have meditated on this line, I have wondered if it wouldn’t be the generous thing to do to end every conversation, not just among friends, but with strangers too—the man standing in line next to you at the grocery—the receptionist at the doctor’s office--I have wondered if it wouldn’t be the right thing to end ALL our conversations with a quick “On behalf of God you are forgiven”—just to make sure that they are covered in case they meet with an accident before they can hear those healing words from someone else.

I want to end this sermon with a story—it’s a story about a pastor and someone he met very literally, on the street. The pastor and his wife had just finished a special wedding anniversary meal at a fine restaurant in New York City. They were just outside the front door of the restaurant, waiting for a cab when a man standing nearby them collapsed on the pavement. The pastor bent over to help the man. When it became clear that his condition was very serious indeed, the pastor’s wife pulled out her cell phone and punched in 911. The pastor stayed with the man, holding his hand and repeating over and over, “An ambulance is on its way. You’re going to be alright.” The man on the sidewalk seemed disoriented, though. He answered back, “Forgive me Charlie.” The pastor corrected the man, telling him his name was Sam and continuing to insist that help was on its way. Still the man chanted, “Forgive me Charlie. Forgive me Charlie.”

In the space of a few minutes the man’s condition deteriorated. His face turned ashen. Seeing the man in such a grave condition, the pastor decided that maybe the thing to do was to BE Charlie. So the next time the man said, “Forgive me, Charlie,” the pastor answered back, “I forgive you. I forgive you.” The man’s face relaxed. He seemed to understand. And then right there on the sidewalk, before the ambulance could reach him, the man died.

The pastor and his wife followed the ambulance, which transported the dead man's body to the hospital. Later that evening the pastor learned from the man's wife that her husband and her son, Charlie, were estranged. In the days that followed, the pastor worried—what right had he to say those words, "I forgive you," on behalf of a man he had never met, and in fact, a man who even when faced with the fact of his father's death, was still estranged from his father. Gradually it came to him that his entire ministry, his entire life was about being the lamb of God as Jesus is the lamb of God—that is, mediating forgiveness between and among others and on behalf of God.

May it be so for you as for me. Amen