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“Unlocking the Locks Of Our Lives”
John 20: 21-23

There is one command given to us in the Lord's Prayer. What is it? Forgive the sins of others as you have been forgiven. In the Apostle's Creed, same thing: forgiving sins is the work of the church. From the cross, Jesus cries “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” Peter wants to limit his forgiveness to 7 times. Jesus shocks him by saying 70x7! In other words, forgive more than you can imagine. In today's lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection and gives one command: forgive others. Forgiveness permeates, dominates, and drives the work of Jesus. Forgiveness is the heartbeat of the Christian life. In fact, you could define the church as the community of God's forgiving. Why is forgiving at the top of the list?

We are immersed in a world of broken relationships. Within families, between friends, in the lives of couples and colleagues, in churches and communities— there are countless stories of alienation and betrayal, mistrust and deception, unresolved hurt, disappointments never addressed, grudges that don't disappear, broken promises, painful divisions. People refuse to speak to each other for decades or forever. The pain of unforgiven relationships is deep, including our inability to forgive ourselves. God hears the cries and feels the tears and smells the despair of our unforgiven lives.

However, as sweet as forgiveness might sound and regardless of how central forgiveness is within the Christian life, we also resist it. The famous lawyer Clarence Darrow once said, “I never killed anyone, but I have read some obituaries with great satisfaction.” The German poet and writer Heinrich Heine said, “We should forgive our enemies, but not before they are hanged.” We are experts at crafting excuses not to forgive: they don't deserve it, they won't change, I want to get even, it's hopeless, they deserve to hurt, they didn't apologize, there's no remorse, I don't want to be hurt again, it won't do any good, it's their fault. Our own grievance is louder than the sweetness of God's grace. At the same time, we also pray that we may embrace God's mercy. Grievance and grace live in this state of tension.

We witnessed this tension on the national stage four weeks ago in Arizona. On September 10 in Utah, Charlie Kirk, a well known conservative political activist was assassinated with one bullet while he was speaking to a large university audience. Eleven days later in a massive memorial service in Arizona, Erika Kirk, Charlie's wife, stunned the crowd with these words referring to the killer, "I forgive this young man (she said) because it was what Christ did, and it is what Charlie would do," she continued through her tears: "The answer to hate is not hate. The answer we know from the Gospel is love and always love." Forgiving the unforgiveable. Minutes later, the President spoke and said this, "I differed from Charlie," he said, "Charlie did not hate his opponents, but I hate my opponent and I don't want the best for them. I cannot stand my opponent."

It was a stunning display of the tension between grace and grievance. Our mistake now would be to focus on the characters in this story, Erika and Trump, instead of seeing how both their voices of grace and grievance are embedded in each of us. Their voices are our voices. We fight this war within our hearts. In Romans 7, St. Paul writes that he fights this tension within himself. And he cries out, "Who will deliver me from this body of death!" He cannot escape it and neither can we. We are too broken to forgive, more incapable than we admit. We need something from the outside—something beyond us, more powerful than us, more holy, more loving. More about that later. For now, our focus is on forgiving. What might guide us in the art of forgiving?

I want to examine five principles that shape the art of forgiving..and the last one is the most important. The first--"Begin With Yourself" What does that mean? Take the first step. Move toward the other even if the other is not moving to you. Jesus summons us to forgive, not to wait until the other is ready. Do not freeze your forgiveness waiting. Taking the lead is really in your best interest because when you hold resentment and retribution, that toxic poison will kill you. The theologian Lewis Smedes writes, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you." Ann Lamott puts it a different way, "Resentment is drinking rat poison and hoping the rat dies." When you withhold forgiving, the other will suffer, but you will suffer more because you are drinking the poison of revenge and retribution. Forgiveness has been defined as "giving up your right to be resentful." Forgiveness really begins as a selfish act, a liberation from our personal prison of pride and fear. Here is a story about "beginning with yourself."

A 25 year old female, Amy, has been cutoff from her father for years. Her dad had an affair, divorced her mother, faded away with his new girlfriend, made weak attempts to connect with Amy over the years. But Amy suffered in anger and sorrow. She was worried how all this was consuming her. She was enraged at him, but had a strange love for him at the same time. Ever felt pulled like that in opposite directions? Reluctantly and after some strong persuasion by me daring her to take a chance, she was willing to write him a letter—not a pleasant one, but a truthful one with an invitation, “I want to talk.” She was full of worry, but she started. She took the step. She summoned her courage. Her father received her letter and said yes. More about this later.

Second—“Patience and Simplicity.” Forgiving is not an act, but more of a journey that is not a straight line, but a crooked line. So many people give up too quickly. They try this and that, don’t see the results, and retreat in frustration and sadness. Jesus practiced a patient love that moves forward with little or no return. This is called “non contingent loving”—a loving that is not dependent on the other’s response or lack of response. This is the heart of the cross, Christian loving, loving without return. This means steady steady with the gift of mercy you have received and not being imprisoned by the other’s responses or lack of them. And this loving can be very simple.

Another story about “patience and simplicity”: Two parents are cutoff from their daughter who lives in another state. She doesn’t respond to their attempts to connect. They try and try. Their hearts are bruised and bleeding. Their feelings are many: anger at her lack of gratitude, worry about her condition, sorrow at losing their daughter, despair, guilt—what did they do wrong? They take a simple step. They drive three hours to where she lives. They knock on her door. She’s home, but doesn’t answer. They come with chicken soup and chocolate chip cookies and they bring this offering to her doorstep, put it down, and depart, leaving a note that they are in town for the weekend and they want see her. She refuses to see them, but she does leave a simple message: “Thanks for the soup and cookies.” Those six little words are like drops of water on their scorched hearts. God will use your small offerings. In their patience, they prayed for their daughter every night. Praying is the partner of patience. Over the months, the ice began to thaw. New connections slowly came to life. Do your work and allow God to do the rest.

Third, “Forgive and Remember.” Forgive and forget is dangerous advice. A book on medical errors in surgery is entitled “Forgive and Remember.” We better remember! Change is only possible when mistakes are remembered and learned from. The horrid concentration camps in Germany were not destroyed so we could remember the atrocities that erupted from vengeance and pride and a desire to dominate. How are we doing at remembering in this country and learning from our memories? The Spanish philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” If past errors are not unpacked and understood, then the repetition of those mistakes is inevitable. Forgiving means addressing tough stuff, examining responsibility, underscoring accountability, and learning from all the errors, the hurts and tragedies.

Back to the story of Amy. She wrote a letter to her father which included the following—hard to write, hard to read. “When you told us you were separating, there was no explanation..it felt like a slap in the face..mom was in tears and you stayed silent...you just didn’t break the marital bond, you broke us..it felt like a death in the family. Then you left us—your clothes, your toothbrush, your car, your scent. You disappeared. No word to your kids...you checked out of your relationship with us.” There were more piercing memories.

Amy’s father received the tough letter, surprisingly agreed to a meeting, and then they walked in a park for an hour and a half, talking with each other, both drenched with tears. This was hard—Amy remembering her hurt, her sorrow, her anger, her questions. Father sharing his story, his guilt, his fear, including recollections of his own childhood. This was a powerful encounter for both of them. Forgiveness summons us into conversations, not just announcements. They listened. They learned. The stage was being set for something different. After hearing about Amy’s experience, her sisters also wanted to have an experience with their father. Amy’s courage was a powerful witness to her entire family.

Fourth, “Revenge and Justice.” We are inclined toward revenge—getting even or giving up. Revenge is not justice. Revenge wants to hurt the other. We are suffocating in the swamp of a revenge and retribution culture through our land. It is not right Justice is not about getting even, but getting it right...righting the wrong which includes consequences and corrective action. Revenge is fueled by contempt. Justice is paired with compassion. Revenge is driven by fear. Justice is lifted by hope.

In Amy's case, it seemed just for her to refuse meeting father's girlfriend at this point; didn't seem right. She also said to her father that he needed to connect each day with her and her sisters if he were to be taken seriously. Behavior had to change. In another case, a divorced father wanted to regain contact with his son. They met to talk. The son was open, but cautious, and he was angry for many reasons. One source of his anger—his father had stolen money from his bank account over the years. The son believed father stole about \$800. As the son angrily told this story, his father without protest pulled out from his wallet a wad of cash—eight \$100 bills—handed it to his son who was stunned. After this shock, the heavens did not part, but the angels whistled a tune. Forgiveness demands justice--change and corrective action.

Finally, we come to the pinnacle of forgiveness—Receiving is better than giving.” You might think this is a typo. Not at all. “Receiving is necessary for forgiving.” Here's why. C.S. Lewis once said, “Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have someone to forgive.” We're all pretty good singing about forgiveness. We're good praying for forgiveness. But we are often pathetic at practicing it. We spin all sorts of excuses. We resist the hard work. We understate our own fragility and fallibility and, instead, we overfocus on the deplorable others. We are very good at looking at the faults in others, but not within us. And when are numb to our own brokenness, there is no way we can be made new by God's mercy. No way we can live with constant gratitude. No way we can forgive others. An empty vessel cannot pour. We need to receive. We need to surrender. And we need to be filled by what is holy. When we are aware of our emptiness, our fear, our brokenness...we are ready to receive.

This happens in our Gospel lesson from John 20. It is the evening of Jesus' strange and astonishing resurrection. Everything has been turned upside down. The disciples are confused, hiding, and locked behind closed doors. They are afraid of the religious leaders. The doors are locked, but their lives are locked as well, bound by the chain of fear. They are empty.

Suddenly, it changes. Jesus unlocks their locked doors, John writes, and appears before them. The French theologian Calvin once said this was a great miracle--Jesus unlocking their locked doors and our locked doors as well. We need to be released from our fear, unchained from our resentment, liberated from our pride....in order for us be forgiven and then to forgive others. Receiving is the foundation for forgiving. Calvin accents this. He writes, “We

should ask God to increase our hope when it is small, awaken it when it is dormant, confirm it when it is wavering, strengthen it when it is weak, and raise it up when it is overthrown.” We cannot do this on our own. We need to be risen up from our fallen, fearful selves. We are invited to receive the beauty of Christ’s presence and the power of Christ’s hope. He breathed on his disciples, John writes. He wants them to take him in, so he breathes on them. He doesn’t want them simply to believe, but to breathe in him by the power of the Spirit. He provides them with the antidote to fear: Peace be with you. My peace be with you Jesus says. He embeds in them the gift of the Spirit. In Psalm 51, King David in his deep despair having defiled all that God wanted for him—an affair with Bathsheba, killing her husband, lying and deceiving others—he is in very bad shape, broken to the core. His only hope, his only prayer—that his life will be restored by the God of all mercy. David knows he cannot forgive himself. He prays to receive: “Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me...restore unto me your joy.” When we receive what Christ offers, only then, only then, only then can we truly give and forgive. May all this be so. Amen.