

We live in a world that loves a good revenge story. If you watch any crime drama or film where there is a baddy we will see revenge sought and relished. If I am honest when I watch those things, I am all about the revenge. Our love of revenge in society makes the gospel of grace and forgiveness deeply uncomfortable. Why should we forgive someone who has wronged us, how can we even begin to do that. It's why the newspapers and website fill up every time a horrific thing happens and the victims choose forgiveness. (PPT) I don't know if you remember a few years ago the shooting that happened in a church in Charleston and I remember the news filling up with this video as victim after victim sat in front of the shooter in a court room and said, "you have taken away the person I love the most, but I forgive you."

Forgiveness is powerful, it is life changing, it also deeply uncomfortable and extremely difficult to do. As Desmond Tutu says "The path of forgiveness is not an easy one. On this path, we must walk through the muddy shoals of hatred and anger and make our way through grief and loss to find the acceptance that is the hallmark of forgiveness."

As I stand here this morning and we spend our second week looking at forgiveness I am aware that in this room, for some even the word forgiveness will cause great pain and anguish. I am aware that there will be people here who have suffered things at the hands of others I couldn't even begin to imagine and yet I stand here saying we are called to forgive. That feels a little bit uncomfortable but in our scripture readings this morning we see a Lord who issues an absolute command to forgive, but who is also a kind, generous and loving God who is 100% with us in this process.

Now before we look at how to forgive, I just want to be sure we know again what forgiveness is so, to recap what Lynda said last week. Forgiveness is not condoning what happened, it is not forgetting what happened, it is not ignoring the need for justice or action for what happened. This is absolutely crucial. Many people can never even approach the vicinity of the idea of forgiveness because they mistakenly believe that forgiving someone means saying, 'It's all right, it didn't really matter!' ... But it does matter! Evil deeds hurt and damage people, and forgiveness does not mean condoning, excusing, forgetting or ignoring. Never! Rather, it is letting go of the anger and bitterness we have held against someone who has wronged us.

But how do we go about actually forgiving those who have hurt us. I want to suggest five simple steps to forgiveness.

Number one. We understand God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is not like human forgiveness. It is complete, it is not flawed, it is not broken but is for everyone. However far we feel we are from God, whatever we have done, he chooses forgiveness. That is what we see on the cross. Even in Jesus' most vulnerable moment he chooses the path of forgiveness and that forgiveness extends to us. In the parable Jesus tells in today's reading the master is quick to show compassion and mercy, the servant is not. God's forgiveness is incredible. Before we are able to forgive others we need to know the forgiveness we have received. And that can be hard for us. In my childhood I used to ask God again and again to forgive me for the same thing because I didn't fully understand his incredible complete forgiveness for me. Humanity is flawed and broken and we break relationship with God, ourselves and others all the time and yet he continually loves and shows kindness and mercy to us. This is what we see in our parable, the ruler doesn't just set up a re-payment plan he completely wipes the debt, we are free.

This reminds me of a man I knew who had been battered and bruised by the storms of life and then he discovered the love of Jesus. I remember clearly the day he got baptised. I have never seen someone SO excited, so overwhelmed, shouting out hallelujah at every opportunity, hugging everyone he good. He had this full revelation of the forgiveness he had received it was incredible.

Do you know you are completely forgiven? For all you have ever done and all you will ever do. That is the good news of Jesus. As we begin to be able to grasp that forgiveness, it helps us to forgive. Our receiving of forgiveness is not based on if we forgive others rather we are able to forgive others because we have been shown forgiveness through Jesus. Our ability to forgive is a sign we know our own forgiveness.

Number two, we need to be honest. This morning the last thing I want you to hear is "you just need to get on with it and forgive." On face value this passage can sound a bit like it is saying that. But I am convinced that Jesus understands completely how difficult forgiveness is, and I think this parable is reminding us how easy it is to be like the unmerciful servant. We do not want to forgive the person who has hurt us. We don't know how. The pain is too deep, it's too much and you know what, I am sure God understands

that and he doesn't want us to falsely say, 'Oh yes I forgive' when we really don't mean it, just because we feel like we have to. And he doesn't want us to shut him out because we can't cope with the whole topic of forgiveness. Instead, our loving God wants us to be totally honest with him about where we are at. I've been reading this week a book by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho called "the book of forgiving" and there is a beautiful prayer in it right at the beginning. This is sometimes how we need to approach forgiveness:

"I want to be willing to forgive, but I dare not ask for the will to forgive In case you give it to me and I am not yet ready. I am not yet ready for the heart to soften, I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again. Not ready to see that there is humanity in my tormentor's eyes or that the one who hurt me may also have cried. I am not yet ready for the journey. I am not yet interested in the path. I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness. Grant me the will to want to forgive. Grant it to me not yet but soon."

We can be that honest with our loving and kind God. Just as a side note. For some people you might be storing up unforgiveness in your heart and you have never been able to tell anyone why. The body of Christ is family and I would encourage you to think about sharing that pain with someone in this church that you trust and be honest with them and let them journey with you as you journey with God in that.

Number three, we choose to forgive. Forgiveness is not a warm, slushy feeling of loving-kindness that just magically sweeps over us, it is an active choice. The man in Jesus' parable had a choice. He could show mercy or he could demand money from the person that owed him. He chose not to forgive. To really forgive, we need to recognise the fact that it is our own choice. Notice too that the ruler didn't force this mans hand once he had been forgiven, forgiveness was still the servants choice. That's what God offers us.

Making the choice to forgive is not an easy one. It is sometimes if we are honest more comfortable to choose to stay mad at the person, to choose to resent and hold bitterness but the reality it that just damages us. It makes our hearts hard, it stops us from being able to let others in. I saw an article the other day about a Christian woman whose son was killed in a hit and run 10 years ago she says this:

“We decided as a couple and as a family that we would pursue forgiveness. That even though at times we didn’t feel like we wanted to forgive her, we would ask God to help us to be able to forgive her.”

A few months later as Rachel was driving her surviving children home, her thoughts turned to the hit-and-run driver:

“I was thinking about her and about how foolish she was and how her foolish choices had robbed us of somebody precious. I just began to feel really upset. I could feel the anger just fill me and encompass me. I felt proper hate and rage.

“I just heard the words of the Lord’s Prayer come into my head, when it says ‘forgive our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.’ I can’t forgive her, but I know I need to, God please help me.” As I said that, I very slowly felt the anger begin to subside.

Desmond Tutu says: “We choose forgiveness because it is how we find freedom and keep from remaining trapped in an endless loop of telling our stories and naming our hurts. It is how we move from victim to hero.

Number four. We bring it to Jesus. The process of forgiveness is much easier when we have God himself who on the cross said ‘father forgive them for they know not what they do’ helping us and journeying with us. We need to pray Jesus I choose to forgive this person, or Jesus I want to forgive this person and then we need to trust he will be with us through that. As we do that we need to recognise with that forgiveness comes the freedom to reject bitterness and resentment and the right to hold that thing against that person or if you are still in relationship with them bring it back up. I have a sister and over the years as sisters do we have had many an argument and said things to each other that weren’t kind. When I have chosen forgiveness for some of those things, I have chosen to not bring that up next time I am hurt to not say “do you remember that time you did this”. I believe as we bring our need to forgive to Jesus the spirit helps us to change our heart. Forgiveness is the active decision to let Jesus be the judge, to let Jesus heal us.

I love the story of Corrie Ten Boon who is an incredible woman who hid jews in her home in WW2 and was eventually arrested and placed in a concentration camp. Only she

survived, both her sister and her father died in a concentration camp and she spent the rest of her life going around telling people about the love of Jesus. This is part of her story.

“It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time.He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message Fräulein”, he said “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!” His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? “Lord Jesus”, I prayed, “forgive me and help me to forgive him”. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. “Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your Forgiveness.” As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

Finally, Number five, we repeat and repeat and repeat. Back to the story of the woman whose son was involved in a hit and run. She said she had to choose to forgive not just once, but every time she thought about the driver that had taken her son’s life.

Forgiveness is a process and a journey that takes time. I think there was a reason Jesus says to Peter seven times seventy, because he knew, he knew the reality of forgiveness is far harder than we can imagine. He knew this would be a process that could take a long time and he is gracious, he is kind, he journeys with us in our own journeys to forgiveness and he never leaves us on the way.

As we come to the Lord’s table I encourage you to come wherever you are on the path of forgiveness. If you are at the I don’t know if I can forgive stage, if you are at the “I know I have to but don’t want to” or if you are at the “I’m ready” come and bring that to Jesus as you come to receive communion. Be honest with him about where you are at and let the power of God begin to help you on that journey.