

The Federated Church of Hyannis

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November 8, 2020 SERMON: "CAN I FORGIVE?" PART 1

INTRODUCTION:

Today is the start of a new sermon series called "Can I Forgive?" Forgiveness is often misunderstood, which is why so many people find it difficult. Yet forgiveness is absolutely essential to being a Christian. C.S. Lewis phrased it this way. "Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional." What makes Christianity unique to all other religions is grace.

To call oneself a Christian, and to claim forgiveness is an impossibility is a contradiction. As a matter of fact, such claims are the number one reason for the rise of atheism in America today. The fundamental teaching of Jesus Christ is the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is not optional; it is an essential necessity for grace to prevail. It is by grace alone (solo gracia) that we are saved from the wages of sin. As Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians Chapter 2 verse 8-9 "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.*"

Forgiveness is not impossible. Rather I would assert forgiveness is misunderstood, which is why it seems impossible.

PART 1: WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT!

There are two ways to explain something. The first is to use metaphors or similes to explain what it is like. The second way is to use antitheses which is to explain what it is not. So to clarify what forgiveness is, it seems best to remove the confusion by identifying what it is not.

1. Forgiveness is NOT **Forgetting**. The number one reason I hear why a person cannot forgive someone is the fact that they cannot forget what that person did. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It would be so much easier if we could forget. But forgiveness is not forgetting, because sometimes it is impossible to forget.
2. Forgiveness is NOT **Reconciliation**. Forgiveness and Reconciliation are connected but they are not the same thing. To reconcile means to restore a harmonious relationship. Often forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. But forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. Just because we forgive a person does not mean we have to like the person.

The belief that forgiveness means we have to like the person or have a harmonious relationship with that person after we forgive them is not what forgiveness is. It is easier

to forgive someone we like than it is to forgive someone we don't like. Forgiveness is not about whether we like the person or not.

3. Forgiveness is NOT **Redemption**. Redemption is the price paid to make full or whole again. Only God can pay the price of redemption for our sins. Forgiveness is a part of seeking God's redemption, but forgiveness is not redemption.
4. Forgiveness is NOT **Faking It**. What I mean by that is forgiveness doesn't mean we pretend everything is fine when it really is not fine. Forgiveness does not mean we suppress our emotions every time we are around someone who makes us upset. Forgiveness is not faking it.

So there are the three biggest myths and misunderstandings of what forgiveness is. It is not **forgetting, reconciliation, redemption, or faking it.** So let me now clarify what forgiveness is, as opposed to what it is not.

PART 2: WHAT FORGIVENESS IS!

Mariam Webster's dictionary says forgiveness is **to give up resentment of.** And Mariam Webster goes on to say **resentment** is to **exhibit annoyance.** Note it says to exhibit, meaning display annoyance.

Forgiveness is to stop treating people with annoyance. It doesn't mean we stop being annoyed; it means we stop exhibiting annoyance.

Consider what this means in the context of what Jesus taught. Does God hate us? God may hate the annoying things we do called sin, however God still loves us. What did Israel do for thousands of years? They sinned, God became annoyed by their sinful behavior, God exhibited annoyance with what they were doing, the people asked for forgiveness, repented (changed their ways), and God forgave them and redeemed them. In essence, God stopped exhibiting annoyance with them.

Forgiveness can lead to good things like restoration, reconciliation, redemption, and resurrection. But forgiveness is not those things. **Forgiveness is to stop exhibiting annoyance.** In other words, forgiveness is not what we give to the other person, forgiveness is what we give to ourselves.

Example: A friend of mine experienced something very terrible many years ago. And as a Christian he felt conflicted because he just could not forgive the person who did the terrible thing. And he explained to me he did not feel comfortable reaching out to the person to tell them he had forgiven them. He didn't feel he could ever have a positive

relationship with this person. He didn't want the person to have any part of his life. And because of all these things he felt guilty that he couldn't forgive the person.

I shared that there was no need to reach out to this person to offer forgiveness because the person never asked for forgiveness. I shared that there was no need to have a positive relationship with this person because he never had a positive relationship with the person prior to the event. And I shared that he didn't need to allow the person to be part of his life because the person never really was a part of his life. If he wanted to forgive the person he could, but the act of forgiveness was to help him let go of the anger that was affecting his life.

Forgiveness is **what we do, it is not** about **what others receive**. In essence, it is living our lives free from the reminders of the annoyances caused by others. We cannot change the past; we can only choose how we are going to live in the moment.

PART 3: THE PRODIGAL SON

Here in the story of the prodigal son, the story is not so much what the son did, but what the father did. It is also what the father encouraged his other son to do. Forgiveness is not a reward for those who do wrong. Forgiveness is about adopting an attitude that all people make mistakes, but those mistakes don't have power over the person who has the potential to forgive.

In the story of the prodigal son there are three people who are robbed of their joy and happiness. The father who grieved the loss of a son. The prodigal son who threw everything away on foolish things. And the faithful son who resented his brother for leaving and then returning. And at the end of the parable two out of the three are happy because they have found how to forgive. The father, who forgives the son. The son, who forgives himself. And the brother, who we don't know if he forgives.

It is hard to imagine that God might love the people we can't stand. God might welcome the people we wish would never come back. We have all been the brother in the story of the prodigal son.

But here is the ending those who listened to Jesus tell the parable of the prodigal son would have known two thousand years ago. Jacob stole the birth right from his brother Esau. And years later when Jacob heard his brother Esau was coming to visit, he was afraid Esau was going to kill him. But instead Jacob found out that because his brother had forgiven him, Esau had greatly prospered. And Jacob had twelve sons. And the brothers hated one of the twelve sons named Joseph who was sold into slavery. And years later when there was a famine, those brothers went to Egypt to buy food and found Joseph was Pharaoh's number two. Forgiveness is moving past the pain so that God can show us how blessed we are. The parable of the prodigal son is experiencing happiness regardless of what bad things may have happened. Forgiveness is finding happiness. Or as Mariam Webster says, Forgiveness is giving up resentment.

PART 4: CAN I FORGIVE?

This sermon series is “Can I Forgive?” I debated calling it “**Can I be Happy Even Though I Know There are Terrible People in the World that Have Done Things that Have Made Me Incredibly Mad or Caused Extreme Hurt?**” That sermon series title might have been better, but it was too long to be a Twitter Thread.

It is my sense there needs to be an open invitation for healing. People do terrible things. There are a lot of people living on the streets because trauma has robbed them of their happiness. There are a lot of veterans who came back from war significantly changed by their experiences. There are a lot of oppressed people who experience anger every day because of the injustice of systems that suppress them. There is a lot of pain and anger in the world. And God does not want us to be in pain or to be filled with anger. That is why God sent his Son Jesus to teach us how to forgive. The joy of the Lord and the peace that passes all understanding is the gift God wants each and every one of us to receive. And it starts with saying three simple words. **I CAN FORGIVE.**

Forgiveness is not what benefits others; forgiveness is what benefits us. The starting point for us is forgiveness. Forgiveness can lead to other things, but it doesn’t always lead to the things I mentioned before like reconciliation. Reconciliation can be the next step after forgiveness. But forgiveness is not reconciliation, which is a different process. This sermon series is not can I reconcile, this sermon series is can I forgive.

Conclusion:

Anyone can choose to forgive. The world is filled with imperfect people that God still loves despite their imperfections. Churches are filled with imperfect people capable of making mistakes. God may love the people we can’t stand sometimes. Eleanor Roosevelt had the famous saying, “no one can make me feel bad about myself without permission, and they don’t have it”.

The parable of the prodigal son is a parable about the brother in the story who didn’t leave home. The father asks the faithful son to accept the fact that he still loves the child who made bad choices. He didn’t ask him to like his brother. Most likely the brothers probably didn’t like each other before the one left home. If they liked each other, the one who left might have stayed.

Saying we can forgive is not saying we have to like a person. Saying we can forgive is not saying we have to reconcile. Saying we forgive is not saying we have to mask our feeling around a person. Forgiveness is not what we need to do for others. Forgiveness is what we need to do for ourselves. **If we can say the words “I can forgive”, we will have taken a significant step in being transformed into the likeness of Christ.**