

“Forgiveness”

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15).

As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I came across this anonymous post on Reddit, and it gave me chills:

I don’t care if it makes me a bad person. I don’t care if I need therapy. I don’t care if it makes me worse than her. I do not care. Listening to her voicemails begging for me to talk to her, reading every letter she sends about how sorry she is, and how she’s changed, and please give her another chance gives me more pleasure than I can possibly explain. She’s a pathetic and sad little woman who would do anything to make her past right. My aunt recently told me she walked into a room where she was holding my baby picture and crying on the couch, and asked her if she thought I would ever want to be near her again. I laughed at that privately. In a way, I view it as her penance; she gets to mourn the daughter she could have had for her entire life. She will never meet her grandchildren, and she will die old and alone with no one around her. And I love it...it makes me so happy to know that she finally gets some kind of retribution.

Almost all of us would say that it’s important to practice forgiveness, but when someone sins against us, we often sing another tune. We harbor angry thoughts, or talk to others about the wrong we’ve suffered, or deride the offender on social media. And the truth is, we’ll do almost anything as long as we don’t have to deal directly with them. Maybe we’re afraid of confrontation. Maybe we are reluctant to open ourselves up to further pain. Or maybe we’re secretly worried that the person will apologize for their sin and we’ll actually have to forgive them. Whatever the reason, a lot of the sin that causes us anxiety and destroys our relationships is never dealt with and, ultimately, that means it’s never forgiven. And nothing could be further from what God wants.

In Leviticus, God tells us that the person who refuses to rebuke or confront his brother, “hates” his brother and then takes it even further saying when we ignore the sin of our brother we, “share in his guilt” (Leviticus 19:17). In today’s reading from Ezekiel, we hear about the watchman charged with the task of warning others when they are in spiritual danger (Ezekiel 33:8). God’s Word is crystal clear: We are our brother’s keeper! We have a responsibility to confront and deal with sin. And this issue is so serious to God – and so important for us as disciples – that in today’s Gospel reading Jesus gives us a step-by-step procedure for confronting our brothers and sisters, and it begins in the most basic way. Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, just between you and him alone” (Matthew 18:15).

Jesus says, “go.” Don’t sit and stew about the wrong you have suffered. Don’t discuss the problem with others who aren’t involved. Don’t air your grievance on Reddit. Don’t even wait for the guilty party to apologize. Go to your brother! It’s been said that the highest respect you can show to a person is to hold them accountable for their sin, and, as Christian people practicing forgiveness, this means we are proactive in the process. We go to our brother, we seek him out, we pursue him if we have to. And once we have his attention, Jesus says we are to “tell him his fault, just between you and him alone.”

Jesus understood the delicate dynamics of accountability, and He gave us these instructions to underscore the purpose of the process. This is not about having control in a relationship; this is not about gaining moral high ground, or being able to say, “I told you so.” The process of confronting sin is always about restoration. It is about bringing healing. It is about delivering forgiveness!

As difficult as it may be, confrontation must be practiced in order for healing to happen. This is gut-wrenching work, and if all God did was instruct us to confront and forgive, it would be an impossible task for us. But God doesn't stop with his command. We are given the instructions to forgive in light of the incredible promise that in Christ Jesus, we too have been forgiven, and because of what God has done, we can go to our brother! We can have difficult discussions and, ultimately, we can forgive because we have been forgiven, and this truth changes everything!

The root of the word forgive is literally "to completely give," and this phrase is a wonderful description of what Christ has done for us. In a love that we can't begin to comprehend, Christ gave everything. Where we are afraid to confront sin, Jesus met sin head-on. Where we have failed as watchmen, Jesus succeeded and, rather than let us die, Jesus actually took the responsibility and sentence for our sin. On the cross, our sin has been confronted, and it has been punished, and the result is that we have been forgiven, and we have the promise of eternal life, and *God has also given us the power to forgive!*

Please don't miss this: *Because of Christ Jesus, God has given us the authority to forgive!* This is a monumental concept, and it is critical for us to hear. When the leader of a country makes an agreement or treaty with another nation, it would be meaningless if that leader didn't have the authority to follow through with the action promised, and if we didn't have the authority to forgive, Jesus' instructions to us in Matthew 18 would be utterly worthless. But because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the whole world, God has given us as His body the power and the authority to forgive. This is the "Office of the Keys," and that is precisely the power Jesus conveyed when He told the disciples in our reading, "whatever you loose (or forgive) on earth will be loosed (or forgiven) in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

We have been forgiven, and because of this incredible gift, we have been given the power to forgive others. And that is the job of the church! We have been justified, we have been sanctified, and we have been called to forgive, and the stakes couldn't be higher. Our actions in this life have an eternal impact, and when we ignore sin for any reason, we risk losing a sister or brother. But when, by God's power, we step out in love to deal with a brother or sister, we deliver what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and God uses us in ways that have eternal value.

Forgiveness is always the job of the Church. *And we are the Church!* This means that forgiveness is *our* job. And as we carry out this work with the people in our lives, the results are relationship-changing and life-saving. Jesus says that when there is repentance and forgiveness, we have "gained a brother." And the truth is that when we forgive, miracles happen. Hard hearts are melted, relationships are restored, wounds are healed, and lives are saved. Not only does forgiveness change things in our earthly lives, but Jesus says that when one sinner repents, "there is rejoicing" in heaven (Luke 15:10), and this doesn't happen on some cosmic scoreboard, it happens in real life – in the relationships we have with family members, co-workers, neighbors, and even with the people sitting next to you this morning.

When it comes right down to it, forgiveness is the only thing that matters. One scholar rightly remarked, "It is always the case that when the Christian looks back (on his life), he is looking at the forgiveness of sins."¹ Christ has completely given Himself to save us from sin, and because we can look back to the cross, we can also look to the future as forgiven people, and we can change the lives of others forever as we carry out the job of the Church for the sake of Christ. Go with the peace of the promise God has given you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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¹ Karl Barth