

“The Craft of Forgiveness”, Eden Mennonite Church, May 29, 2005

Introduction

It is good to be here to share from God’s Word.

My theme this morning is *forgiveness* in the context of the work of M2/W2/P2 ministries. There is a display in the foyer. I will happily talk with any of you afterwards about our ministry. And of course many of you know well this ministry and have supported it for many years. Thank you. *Our Annual General Meeting is May 31, at 7:00 p.m.*

Briefly: M2/W2 Association – Restorative Christian Ministries operates a prison visitation program that sees about 350 volunteers actively engaged in prison ministry in most of the prisons in British Columbia. We constantly need more volunteers. I will gladly talk with you about that after the sermon.

We operate as well a Circles of Support and Accountability project jointly with Catholic Charities. We establish Circles of four to seven people to work with high risk sex offenders upon release into the community. We hold the sex offender accountable while helping him make a go of living in the community. We especially need male volunteers from Chilliwack right now!

We also operate a Parent to Parent program right here in Chilliwack that we hope to expand to other communities. Volunteers provide weekly visits to parents struggling with social isolation, etc., in raising healthy kids in the zero to five years. I had hoped that **Maureen Donegan**, our staff person from Chilliwack, could have been here today to share a little.

We need volunteers to work with socially isolated parents, usually moms, who do not know or do not have the means, to access community resources in raising their young children. Volunteers visit parents and their kids weekly, offer fruit supplements, and generally help resource parents to “*Train a child in the way he should go, [so that] when he is old he will not turn from it* (Prov. 22:6).” That ancient proverb is proved true by contemporary research that says the zero to five years are *absolutely crucial* in a child’s pro-social and hence non-criminal development.

We need volunteers right now. Please do talk to me afterwards.

Further, we offer regular CORE and topical trainings to volunteers and the general public. Each year in particular, we highlight the plight of victims of crime, and our need to remember them in all our reaching out to the perpetrators. We are currently doing a series of trainings for people on conditional release and parole. The focus is on providing volunteer advocates for “Mentally Disordered Offenders” appearing at parole hearings. There is a training tomorrow evening in Abbotsford. There are notices at the back.

Finally, we are committed to an approach to crime known as “Restorative Justice”, something that has emerged into worldwide prominence only in the last

30 years. Restorative Justice holds out hope for healing for all caught up in the crime equation: victim, offender, and impacted community, including the criminal justice community. It is a peacemaking, not a warmaking response to crime.

I worked at developing such responses to crime with Mennonite Central Committee Canada for ten years as Director of Victim Offender Ministries. This was on the national and international fronts. Restorative Justice has profound Christian spiritual roots and much leadership continues to be given to the worldwide movement by Christians. I have been involved in this work almost as long as it has been in existence. But that is another theme, not today's, though related, as we shall see.

Wilma Derksen

Some of you know the following story. I have had years of work with Wilma Derksen. Wilma grew up right in this area.

Wilma Derksen's daughter set out to walk home Nov. 30, 1984 in Winnipeg, after her mother had told her on the phone she could not pick her up from school that day. Wilma tells this story in her book, *Have You Seen Candace?*, which some of you have read. Candace was not seen alive again by her family. She was kidnapped, and left to freeze to death, tied and bound, in an abandoned shack.

It took two months for her body to be found.

At one point not long after her funeral, a close friend asked Wilma, "What would be justice for you?" Wilma let her imagination respond. She began to envision no less than ten child murderers lined up for execution. And she would pull the trigger, one by one. As she did so, and watched each drop lifeless to the ground with their death hoods falling loose, she could almost taste the sweetness of revenge, and knew for a few exquisite moments that this would indeed be "justice" for her. But her mind's movie projector continued to roll. She looked up from the scene of desecration that she had just created and suddenly saw ten mothers like her weeping unbearably for their children, and knew she had now created ten other victims' families.

"But that doesn't satisfy", she heard herself saying, "I think our choice to forgive is the right one. (*Have You Seen Candace?: A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*, Wilma Derksen, 1991, pp. 224ff)."

She adds:

"By forgiving we can transcend the hurt and choose to be loving again (p. 227)." The subtitle of her book is: *A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*. Justice became for Wilma and her family a conscious choice of *pardon* and *mercy*.

Wilma went on to provide leadership to something called "Victim's Voice", that reaches out in particular to victims of crime with an invitation to go down a road of healing. She more recently published a book, at the display table, entitled: *Confronting the Horror* in which she identifies fifteen elements of experience a victim must have before moving on.

Luke Johnson, theologian, says the greatest act of forgiveness must be towards our fathers (or parents, one could add). Simone Weil, 20th-century French intellectual and mystic, says the greatest act of forgiveness must be towards God. Another huge area of forgiveness must be towards ourselves, theme of a booklet published by Mennonite Central Committee, entitled *Restorative Justice in Ourselves*.

Please pause for a moment of reflection:

Whom do you/do I most need to forgive?

Whom do we most need to ask for forgiveness?

What steps will we take towards this?

Warning

However, Wilma Derksen has warned repeatedly against *cheap forgiveness* like “cheap grace”. She says that Christians should never foist the *forgiveness* word upon victims. Victims must discover that themselves, and only after working through at least fifteen elements of healing. Otherwise, “forgiveness” becomes an “F” word. Further, it should never be “*forgive and forget*”, so profoundly unbiblical; rather “*remember and forgive*”.

Wilma wrote about her daughter’s murder in *Have You Seen Candace?* She wrote also about the fifteen elements of healing in *Confronting the Horror*. The subtitle of her book about Candace is, “A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness”. But this was a hard-won forgiveness. Only then can the negative “F” word be transformed into a positive “F” word: *Freedom!* In this case, *forgiveness* is the pair of scissors that cuts the marionette strings of the puppeteer, the offender, who controls the victim with a spirit of revenge and unforgiveness.

Questions:

One may ask:

Must victims forgive to remain faithful Christians? If yes or no, why?

What does “forgiving” mean for Wilma Derksen in the brief part of her story recounted here? What does it mean for you?

If you are a crime victim, are you able even to consider offering forgiveness?

If you are a victim, how might you be helped by the church on your journey towards wholeness?

Whom can you trust to ask for help to move towards healing?

Embodying Forgiveness

In a profound theological analysis of forgiveness entitled *Embodying Forgiveness*, Gregory Jones writes,

“Most fundamentally, then, forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and with others (*Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, 1995, p. xii).”

In the Lord’s Prayer of Matthew 6:9 – 15, we discover that God’s forgiveness to us is dependent upon our willingness to forgive the other. Isn’t that amazing? Please listen to the text:

*This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. **Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” **For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.***

Please also listen to
Mark 11:25:

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Biblical Transformation

Do you remember Lamech’s boast in Genesis 4:23-24. ?:

“Lamech said to his wives, ‘Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.’ ”

Now let’s look at Exodus 21:23-25. *“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”*

Finally, notice Matthew 18:21 and 22. *“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’ ”*

What kind of progression in response to wrongs is going on from ancient neareastern culture (still front and centre with us today in the seeming endless acts of terrorism and counterterrorism worldwide), to Mosaic Law, to Jesus’ New Covenant directed to the church?

It is this:

there is a movement from limitless retaliation (*seven times seventy in vengeance*);
to a statute of limitation on vengeance (*no more than an eye for an eye, a life for a life, etc. – no “retaliatory dentistry”*);
to limitless willingness to forgive, endless practice of forgiveness (*seventy-seven times in forgiveness*).

Let’s also look briefly at Ephesians 4:29 – 32 and Colossians 3:12 – 14:

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving each other**, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other **and forgive whatever grievances** you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.** And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

Questions and Answers

What is the standard set for our acts of forgiveness to the other?
God in Christ.

What overall virtue aids us in pursuit of forgiveness, and what does that mean?
Love. Love in the New Testament is the endless bid to draw a circle of inclusion around the neighbour and enemy, around *Everyone*.

What would it look like were we to “go and do likewise”?
Prodigality. We would be *prodigal* – lavish to grand excess – like the Father in the *Rebellious Son* story of Luke 10. Like *amazing grace*.

As Debbie Morris indicates at the end of her remarkable story, *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*,
“We don’t sing ‘Amazing Justice’, we sing ‘Amazing Grace’.” And she ends the book with these words: “Does that mean I think a holy God would oppose the execution of a convicted murderer like Robert Willie?”

“I don’t know; I’m still wrestling with that question. But I do know this: Justice didn’t do a thing to heal me.

“Forgiveness did (p. 251).”

What does Jesus say in Luke 6?:

*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons [and daughters] of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. **Forgive, and you will be forgiven.** Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:35-38)*

Jesus gives a series of pithy instructions. What ties them all together? *Love!*

What is the “measure” we use in our relationships? What about:

family,
friends,
co-workers,
church family,
neighbours, enemies near (criminals, the sexually immoral, etc.),
enemies afar (terrorists, etc.)

A Story

Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian still very active today in making peace between Palestinians and Jews, was confronted for several months by the cold, unforgiving hearts of his parishioners. Then:

On Palm Sunday of his first year as pastor of Ibillin, Elias looked from the front of the church at the stony faces before him. One of the brothers, a policeman, sat in the front row with his wife and children. Hymns were sung, but without any spirit. There were readings from the Bible, and then a sermon. ‘The congregation endured me indifferently,’ Elias recalls, ‘fulfilling their holiday obligation to warm the benches.’ But before the service ended, he did something no-one, perhaps not even he himself, had anticipated. He walked to the back of the church and padlocked the door.

Returning to the front of the church, he told his parishioners, ‘Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other. You gossip and spread lies. Your religion is a lie. If you can’t love your brother whom you see, how can you say that you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the Body of Christ to be disgraced. I have tried for months to unite you. I have failed. I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He has the power to forgive you. So now I will be quiet and allow him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, then we stay locked in here. If you want, you can kill each other, and I’ll provide your funeral gratis.’

Ten minutes passed, but for Elias they seemed like hours. At last the policeman stood up, faced the congregation, bowed his head and said, ‘I am sorry. I am the worst of all. I have hated my own brothers. I have hated them so much that I wanted to kill them. More than any of you, I need forgiveness.’

He turned to Elias. ‘Father, can you forgive me?’

‘Come here,’ Elias replied. They embraced each other with the kiss of peace. ‘Now go and greet your brothers.’

The four brothers rushed together, meeting halfway down the aisle, and in tears forgave each other.

‘In an instant,’ Elias recalls, ‘the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance.’

Elias had to shout to make his next words audible. ‘Dear friends, we are not going to wait until next week to celebrate the Resurrection. Let us begin it now. We were dead to each other. Now we are alive again.’ He began to sing, ‘Christ is risen from the dead. By his death he has trampled death and given life to those in the tomb.’ The congregation joined in the hymn. Unchaining the door, Elias led them into the streets.

‘For the rest of the day and far into the evening, [Elias said], I joined groups of believers as they went from house to house. At every door, someone had to ask forgiveness for a certain wrong. Never was forgiveness withheld (*Making*

Friends of Enemies, Jim Forest, pp. 45 & 46.”)

That church went on to develop amazing ministries in many directions over the next several years.

An Orthodox scholar, Father Thomas Hopko, said in an interview: “Now, if ... we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and so on, [every] act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That’s how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God’s image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical [, a spiritual,] suicide (*Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, “Forgiveness”, Volume XII, Number 3, August 1987, pp. 50 - 59).”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *No Future Without Forgiveness* writes about a unique African understanding of our humanness called *ubuntu*:

“*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human.... It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ [René Descartes] It says rather, ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’... Our humanity is caught up in that of all others. We are humans because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence. Truly ‘it is not good for man to be alone,’ [Genesis 2:18] for no one can be human alone. We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not and each one of us is a precious individual (Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 1999, pp. 196 & 197).”

Questions

What does Father Hopko mean by: “So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical suicide.”?

How do we likewise move towards becoming and remaining fully human?

How can forgiveness become a way of life encompassing the entirety of our lives?

Forgiveness is a *craft* claims theologian Gregory Jones.

“The craft of forgiveness is a lifelong learning process that people are initiated into as apprentices to those who excel at the craft. Those who excel have a moral authority as teachers, and apprentices must recognize a gap between their present competencies and genuine excellence (*ibid*, p. 226).”

The image is that of a Master/Apprentice relationship. Our primary lifelong challenge as Christians, as humans, is to learn and live out the craft of forgiveness.

Conclusion

One of the most fascinating publications on this theme is Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. The author begins with his

own story as a concentration camp survivor, then invites 46 persons to say what they would have done in response to his story. He has done this twice with different respondents in each edition of his book.

In brief, a mortally wounded SS officer, near death, orders Wiesel to his bed side to confess to a horrible crime in which he had participated: the herding of nearly 200 Jews, men, women, and children into a house with several gas cans inside. Hand grenades were thrown through the windows, and the house soon was a towering inferno. Anyone escaping was mercilessly shot.

Wiesel hears out the dying Nazi officer. The officer asks the Jew to forgive him before he dies. Wiesel leaves the room without saying a word. He eventually writes a book, and invites in two different publications, dozens to answer the question:

What would you do? WWYD?

I invite you to consider a variation of that question:

What would Jesus do? WWJD?

I also invite you to consider variations of that question:

Whom would Jesus bomb? WWJB? – to wax political just for a moment.

Whom would Jesus exclude? WWJE?

There is a final *WWJD* to ponder:

Whom would Jesus Damn? WWJD?

I invite you, with your eyes on Jesus, in light of the biblical call to forgive:

Go and do likewise! Amen.