

“God the Forgiver”
by Jodie Nychuk
Sunday August 27, 2023

Colossians 3:12-17

Whenever there is forgiveness, there is wrongdoing. In the bible, Jesus speaks often of the importance of Christians forgiving or showing mercy towards others. The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the best-known parables about forgiveness that refers to God's ongoing forgiveness for His people. The prodigal son also messed up pretty badly which shows that God has a great capacity for forgiveness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly speaks of forgiveness, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Matthew 5:7 (NIV)
"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Matthew 5:23-24 (NIV). And when Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive? Up to 7 times? Jesus replied, "up to 70 times 7" (18:21-22).

I don't know about you but I'm not always so generous with my forgiving. In fact, in my younger days when I got angry about something, I would go for a walk. Good idea, right? In most cases this is a good strategy, but when I walked I would "stew" and think about other's past wrongdoings. By the time I got from my walk, I would be even angrier and less forgiving. Then God put on my heart the idea of listening to music and praying when I walked, and things changed!

In the gospel of Luke, we are told to "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Luke 6:36 (NIV) "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Luke 6:37 (NIV) And let us never forget that Jesus asked for God's

forgiveness of those who crucified him. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" Luke 23: 34.

With these many directives and examples to forgive let us now turn to today's scripture readings for further guidance. Colossians encourages us to forgive as the Lord forgives us and to act with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. It takes humility to set aside our pride and apologize when we have done something wrong.

Psalm 130 points out that if our Lord kept a record of sins, who could stand? When I'm struggling to forgive, I often think of this. When our Lord so graciously forgives me for my wrong doings – how can I not extend this forgiveness to others?

Psalm 130 also reminds us that when God forgives us, He also offers love in return. We still have a place with Him. Instead of running away from Him because we are afraid and ashamed, we can humbly stand before God knowing that His great mercy enables us to have a fresh start. How amazing is this?

In Volf's book about our giving and forgiving God, there is an interlude between the two sections. In this interlude Volf shares the tragic story of his older brother Daniel. In 1957, when their aunt was babysitting, 5-year-old Daniel slipped through the gate in their courtyard and went to a nearby military base. One of the soldiers put him on his horse-drawn bread wagon. As they were passing through the gate on a bumpy cobblestone road, Daniel leaned sideways, and his head got stuck between the door post and the wagon while the horse kept going. Daniel died on the way to the hospital.

The soldier felt so terrible that he had to be admitted to the hospital. Volf's father, with a hole in his heart that would never quite heal, went to visit him, to comfort him and to tell him that both he and Daniel's mother forgave him.

“The word of God tells us to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us” so his parents chose to forgive and insisted that they wouldn’t press charges.

After the soldier was discharged from the army his father continued to make the two-day trip to visit, as he was concerned for him and wanted to talk to him about God’s love, which is greater than an accusing heart – even our own self accusing and guilt-ridden hearts.

Volf states that revenge, in its zeal to punish, takes more from the offender than is due. Revenge multiplies evil whereas forgiveness overcomes evil with good. In the case of his brother, his parents couldn’t bear the pain of attending the soldier’s trial but were sure to communicate their forgiveness as well as the fact that they weren’t bringing charges. Although the soldier was negligent in his actions there was never an intent to harm – it was a preventable but tragic accident. Seeking revenge would only have made things worse.

In May 1981, the late Pope John Paul II was shot when Mohammed Agca attempted to kill him. Two years later, the Pope sat with his would-be assassin in his cell. He tenderly held the hand that held the gun that was meant to kill him. The two spoke softly and the Pope forgave him for the shooting. The Pope’s forgiveness was a public gesture but a private act as Agca remained in prison.

With both of the examples I just shared there was explicit wrongdoing. Volf’s parents didn’t deny that the soldier’s negligence in not ensuring the safety of a five-year-old boy led to his death. But when we forgive, we let go of the demand for retribution. Forgiveness cuts the tie of equivalence between the wrongdoing and how we treat the offender. We don’t take an eye for an eye.

But this doesn’t mean that we abandon discipline. Pope John Paul didn’t insist on taking Agca’s life, but he remained in prison for his crime. If someone has wronged or mistreated us or a loved one, we are called to forgive but if there

is potential for that harm to continue, we need to remember that offence and protect ourselves or them from further harm.

We also can't force someone to forgive us or to accept our forgiveness if the wrongdoing isn't acknowledged. In the case of the soldier, he not only admitted to his negligence, but he was deeply affected by it. Volf's parents wanted him to know that he was forgiven by them but also by a loving and forgiving God and they encouraged him to forgive himself. Two years passed before the Pope sat down with Agca – his would-be assassin had to be ready to accept the Pope's forgiveness just as the Pope had to be ready to give it.

If we have someone who has decided not to forgive us, we need to take it to our forgiving God and pray that He may soften their hearts to accept our forgiveness. We need to accept that this might not happen on our timeline and give it over to God.

Let's say that you meet a friend for lunch, and they surprise you with a gift – you would be very happy and likely say something like "Thank you. That was very thoughtful". Now imagine that you meet that same friend for lunch and as soon as they sit down, they say "I forgive you!" How might you react? Likely confused -especially if you haven't wronged them. If someone forgives us for something that we haven't done – it isn't a gift, it is an insult.

I actually had this happen to me. I had lost touch with a close friend that I met in teacher's college. After years of friendship, she just stopped communicating with me – in today's terms, I would say that she completely "ghosted me". I mailed her letters and reached out repeatedly with no response. A few years later, I found out that she got divorced. At this point she had moved, and I had no contact information. My door was always open, and I knew that she could get in touch with me if she wanted to.

One day, five years after losing touch she called me. She started the conversation by saying that she forgave me – needless to say, this was a

short conversation as I shared my many repeated attempts to stay in touch with her. When she stated that she had a lot going on in her life with her divorce, I mentioned that I had a lot going on as well in the five years of not communicating including the death of my father.

A few days after this initial conversation she called back – no longer blaming me but taking responsibility for her wrongdoing and asking for my forgiveness. She had let her embarrassment over getting divorced get in the way of our friendship. Thankfully we remain friends to this day – letting go of the past.

When we receive forgiveness, we take responsibility for our wrongdoing, and I have had to do this many times! Forgive us our trespasses. If we fail to confess, we are stating that we do not need forgiveness. Confessing to our wrongdoing is hard but it is also wonderfully freeing.

Thankfully, the many wrong doings that we listed in our heart don't break or invade God. Under the assault of sin God remains God. God's forgiving has nothing to do with us deserving it. He offers forgiveness because of who He is.

It's much more difficult for us humans – because we're human we can't forgive exactly as God does. But because we're created in His image, we should forgive similarly to how God forgives. We don't just do this by imitating God because we're not independent of God. God is always with us. We're made for God to live in us and for us to live in God. We just need to open our hearts.

We started by singing "Open the eyes of our heart, Lord" but look at how crowded our heart is with all of this wrongdoing. God never wants all of these sins to weigh down our hearts, so he sent Jesus to the cross to free us forever. What do we do to make it right? Just as in our prayer of confession –

we humbly admit what we have done and ask God for forgiveness. Confession brings things from the dark into the light.

When we confess our wrongdoings, they can't have power over us anymore. By freely admitting that we've done something wrong, we are defeating pride and humbling ourselves which opens the door to God's grace. This includes making it right with the person we have wronged. We are assured of God's forgiveness and can erase our transgressions.

1 John 1:9 in the amplified version states that "If we freely admit that we have sinned and confess our sins, He is faithful and just (true to His own nature and promises) and He will forgive our sins and continuously cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What a glorious promise. God wants to free us from the weight of our sins today and every day.

The only weight that God wants us to carry is the eternal weight of His glory. As talked about in 2 Corinthians vs 4:17 – so let the power of God's forgiveness and cleansing totally overwhelm any guilt or shame you're feeling; breathe in His peace and goodness, becoming more aware of His deep love and compassion toward you.

We are forgiven and free! God is faithful and just! He will never let us down. Allow His love to overflow in your soul.

Let us pray: Our merciful and forgiving God how thankful we are to have you ever present in our hearts and our lives. Help us to forgive others as you continually forgive us our trespasses. It is not always easy Lord, but we know that the only way to respond to your forgiveness is by passing on forgiveness to others and asking for forgiveness when we mess up. Jesus thank you for loving us so much that you died on the cross to remove our sins and make us right with you. We're tired of being weighed down by our sins. We admit that we've fallen short of your standards, please forgive us and cleanse us now. Amen.