

Lent 2
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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To Forgive as Forgiven People

I invite you to do a personal emotional check-in. What are you feeling at this moment? Are those feelings pleasant or unpleasant, warm or cold, clear, confused, simple or complex? OK, file that away for just a few minutes.

Now, think of the most unpleasant moment of the last week. It might have been embarrassing, it might have made you angry, sad, frustrated or frightened. Recall, if you can, as much detail as possible. When you are fully into that moment, take another "emotional pulse." How are you feeling now?

OK, that wasn't very fun, so let's go the other way. Think of the most pleasant moment of the last week. Don't worry, if you blush we won't ask questions! Let yourself recall the people involved, the context, the sights, sounds and smells. Now, when you are fully in this moment, take another "emotional pulse." How are you feeling now?

OK, come back to the present. Compare the way you have felt in the last few minutes. How have your emotions changed from your baseline check-in? What happened to change your emotional state? Was it not merely remembering different moments in your week? Memory is an amazing thing. Memory allows us to have relationships, family and friends, have a society and a culture, a history and a future. Memory allows us to construct an idea of our personal story. How we tell those stories of our past sets the context for our present and our trajectory into our future. Memory roots us in time.

But memory is not necessarily the most accurate record of the past. We are hard-wired to believe that our memories are indeed accurate, and that is not all a bad thing, but it can trip us up. The story goes of a farmer who had deer on his property. One year a fawn was born that was blind. Having a good sense of smell, the fawn learned how to find its way around by scent. It memorized the deer trails, and was getting along fairly well. One night a windstorm blew a log down over one of the deer's trails. The next morning the deer trotted down his familiar path, and took quite a tumble over the fallen log. It found its way back to the trail by scent, and the farmer, out of pity for the deer, removed the log. But the deer, from then on, when it got to that place, would carefully walk a semicircle around it!

Today's sermon is really not about memory, but about the Cross, the horizontal arm of the Cross: "Love your neighbor as yourself," our relationship with other people and the

earth. As the vertical stem of the cross speaks of God's forgiveness of us, the horizontal arm reminds us that the forgiveness we have received requires of us like forgiveness of those who offend us.

Robert Voyle in his book, Restoring Hope, (2010) talks about the dynamics of resentment and the process of forgiveness. He says, "*Resentment is a current demand that someone or something in the past should have been different.*" (p. 158) According to Voyle, resentment uses memory to do a bit of time-travel, to bring that past event into the present so we can dwell in it again, or rather, to move ourselves into the past and live there rather than in the future. Voyle says,

"Without forgiveness people remain trapped in their past, obsessing over what has been done to them. This obsession leads a person to use their injury as a way to re-injure themselves and stay in a state of victimization. While they are looking back to the past, it is impossible to look forward and to experience hope. (p. 157)

If the vertical stem of the Cross is about the forgiveness received, the horizontal arm of the Cross is about forgiveness given. How do we forgive?

The first thing we need to do is dispel some of the ideas that make it easy to remain resentful. First, forgiveness is not about forgetting. Whatever happened to you happened to you. Forgetting is a way of lying and telling yourself it didn't happen. That can be unwise. If you got punched in the face, the person may be a "face-puncher." Standing closer than 18 inches is a forgetful thing to do! God has made it so that every event in your life has the potential of bringing out the image of Christ in you. To forget is to deny and shortchange that process. Nothing should be forgotten until every ounce of wisdom and compassion can be mined from it.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Reconciliation is relational. It lays the groundwork for trust, and trust is something developed over time on the basis of mutuality. Forgiveness is given unilaterally. God forgives us before we ask, God forgives us before we sin! God never asked us if we wanted to be forgiven. We, too, can extend forgiveness to another without them knowing, wanting or accepting it.

Forgiveness is not easy. You can't just say, "I forgive you!" and it's done. We often cling to resentments because there is a pay-off in the present. We can do the "martyr" thing and gain sympathy from others. We can use the past injury to lay guilt trips on others to try to control them. We can use the injury to convince ourselves all over again that we aren't worth loving. We can use the injury to manipulate situations to our advantage. It's a death-and-resurrection thing. We let go of the resentment, we gain

freedom. Forgiveness means giving up the present benefits of the resentment for the greater freedom of forgiveness.

There are two who are the hardest to forgive. The first is God. God is in charge of everything, right? How could God have been so insensitive and hurtful as to allow these things to happen to me? It's easy to blame God for the inner work we need to do, but it's a cop-out. The second is one's self. I should have known better! How could I have been so thoughtless and stupid? It is an easy slippery slide to self-loathing, which is not forgiveness and is not healthy.

To forgive we must do three things:

First, if resentment is a current demand from something that is past, we can give up the demand. If we make our demands into preferences we concede that there are some things we can't control. We can't really control other people. We can't guarantee the future. We can't change the past. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the Gospel lesson wanting answers. Jesus said all who are born of the Spirit are like the wind whose source and end you do not know. \What he got was an invitation to mystery and surrender. The first step is an exercise in surrender. Change the demand into a preference. *"I wish it hadn't been that way,"* rather than, *"It shouldn't have been that way."* Maybe it really shouldn't have been that way, but it was, surrender to the truth of the past. It is what it is.

Second, remember that the offender is loved as completely and unconditionally as we are. What does God think of them compared to you? (Hint: God loves you both the same.) In the Epistle lesson today Paul argues that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. If we are justified by faith, not by works, might it be possible that something someone did might make them unworthy of God's love? Of course not! He probably sees you both the same. What must it have been like to be in their shoes? What could have motivated them to act as they did? What forgiveness might they be seeking from God? (Hint: Probably not what you think or wish it were.)

Finally, mine the event for wisdom and compassion. In the Old Testament lesson today God calls Abram to go to an unknown place. He didn't know it at the time, but his journey would establish the Hebrew and Arabic peoples in the land now called the Middle East. So much came from what he did not know. How might this offense be an unknown promised land? It might be helpful to ask yourself some of these questions:

- What can your experience teach you?
- Why did this particular action irk you so?
- What other similar situations have led to similar responses in you?

- What do they have in common?
- What does that tell you about what is important to you?
- Might those things not be important to another?
- If not, why not?
- If so, why is that particular value shared?
- What evidence do you have that God values those things as well?
- What eternal values are reflected in what you value?
- Where else are those eternal values expressed in your life?
- If you let go of this violation of those values does it diminish the value any? (Of course not!)

How can the experience make you more loving? “*Here in is love, not that we loved God, but that God first loved us.*” (I John 4:10) “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*” (Matthew 7:12) How might you help God show God's love for them? (Pray for them. Do good things for them.) Are there others in your life who are like them whom you also find it hard to love? This is a great practice session for all the other offenders in your life.

Every Sunday we pray, “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” Resentment is a heavy burden to bear. As one friend of mine put it once, it started out like a small rock at room temperature, and when it finally set it down it was as big as a house and hot as molten lava! Holding on to it keeps you in the prison of the victim. Letting go of it frees you up for your future. The wisdom and compassion make the future more manageable, and the absence of the dark cloud makes room for hope.

As you cross yourself this Lent, and your hand goes from shoulder to shoulder, remember that the action is a challenge to yourself. Forgive as you have been forgiven.