Sermon 11-18-18

Paul Purdue preaching

If we  aim to live like Jesus, we must strive to master the art of forgiveness.   A sermon usually explores only one part of complex ideas like love, grace forgiveness or hope.  So, unless we take a few hours in a symposium,this sermon must leave a few strings untied. With that in mind, let me share two caveats.  First, forgiveness is not about naming an offense as acceptable. Second, forgiving does mean sweeping away all consequences.

Forgiveness is a condition of the heart.  In Matthew 18:35, Jesus says we must “forgive from our heart”.   Forgiveness speaks of a yielding or flexible heart, as opposed to a  hardening or rigid heart. Forgiving pulsates through our communion liturgy: “*Hear the good news: Christ has died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!”* and The congregation  says to the celebrant*“ In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.*  Forgiveness is a hope-filled act, longing for wholeness.

Forgiveness is not something we simply soak up. Jesus cautions that to experience deeper Forgiveness we must practise of the art of forgiveness.   *When will we learn what it means, when Jesus says ”if we fail to forgive”, we will miss the power of forgiveness?   Can we love apart from forgiveness? Can we love apart from mercy? Can we experience hope, if we are stuck in a cycle of retribution and unforgiveness?  Is not forgiving a hope-filled act? Do you know the sweet taste and deep release of forgiving? When will be mature enough to focus less on receiving forgiveness and more on practising the art of forgiving, that Jesus mastered?*

The Bible’s grand theme is forgiveness. In Genesis’ second telling of the Creation Story, God plants an amazing weedless garden, a foragers dream,  a paradise of thornless berries, lush fruits, and hearty vegetables. Every day Adam and Eve chatted with God in the cool of the evening. God gave us just one rule, and you guessed it, we broke it! Luther imagined a perpetual scenario where Eve said, “Adam, why did you eat that apple?”  and Adam retorted “ Eve, you gave it to me!” (Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace)

What does The Creator do? God asks hard questions, the garden grows up with weeds,  the easy hunter gathering lifestyle goes away, hard work enters our lives, and worst of all, animosity creeps into what once was paradise.  God makes clothes for us, who before sin came along, never felt shame at our bodies. When Eve becomes our first Mother, she names God’s presence saying “*With the Lord’s help, I have given birth to humanity!”*The Bible is a story of us quitting, cheating, and breaking the rules of the game- And God picking up the scattered pieces, resetting the disjointed board, and inviting us back into the game. God starts over with us again, and again, and again, and… . God always is helping create a new normal for us. God adjusts the plan.   That divine reset, that renewing forgiveness, is our Hope.

Just after the Fall, Cain murders his brother.  Sadly, it is a story of religious resentments flowing from the first worship wars.   God address Cain, the first premeditated intentional murderer, “What did you do? Your brothers blood cries out from the ground!”   The Almighty Judge does not demand an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, or a life for a life, thereby violating Leviticus (24:20). God even consoles a grieving Cain. God even gives this murderer an Order of Protection from vengeful mobs.  There are consequences, Cain wanders about, God resets Cain creating a new normal. God gives the murderer hope.

The Cross pushes us into the deep end of God’s love.  On the cross Jesus cries out: “Father, forgive them they don’t know what they are doing”.  (Luke 23:34). Some might argue with Jesus, oh they most certainly do know what they are doing Jesus! They planned the whole thing. They got Judas to turn on you.  They stirred up the crowd. They pressured Pilate. They spent 30,000 bucks to set you up. They mock your forgiveness with a crown of thorns. They are not asking for forgiveness, even now they taunt you as you hang there beaten, bleeding, naked, and dying before them….

Paul pushes us into the deepest waters of forgiveness: “*now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free… Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?  No, in all these things we are more than victors through the one who loves us. I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.* (Romans 8) Paul imagines a forgiving-love that holds us no matter what.

“In the New Testament the most common Greek word for forgiveness means, literally, to release, to hurl away, to free yourself” ( Yancy) Resentment comes as an emotional opposite of forgiveness, representing what happens if the heart stays stuck in a cycle of payback. “Resentment means literally “to feel again”: resentment clings to the past, reliving it over and over, picking each fresh scab so that the wound never heals.” (Yancy).

Paul Tillich calls forgiveness an intentional forgetting- and speaks of its power to offer hope and remake a life:.   “*A kind of (intentional) forgetting is decisive for our personal relationships. No (whole relationship) is possible without a silent act of forgiving, repeated again and again. Forgiving presupposes remembering.  Forgiving creates a forgetting not in the natural way we forget yesterday’s weather, but with a great "in spite of." Forgiving says: I forget although I remember. Without this kind of forgetting no human relationship could endure healthily. I don’t refer to a solemn act of asking for and offering forgiveness. Such rituals  are often acts of moral arrogance on the one part and enforced humiliation on the other. I speak of the lasting willingness to accept (again) the one who has hurt us. Such forgiveness is the highest form of forgetting, although it is not forgetfulness. The stumbling block of having violated another is pushed into the past, and there is the possibility of something new in the relationship. Forgetting in spite of remembering is forgiveness. We can live only because our guilt is forgiven and thus eternally forgotten. And we can love only because we forgive and are forgiven.* “ THE ETERNAL NOW

Tillic is not speaking of abuse, nor am I.  At times people are so violent or vile that we must step away.  We must break the cycle. We must break away. You can forgiving even as you take out a warrant.  Forgiving releases us from abusers. Forgiving entrusts the perpetrator to God and a just community.  Forgiving an oppressor, breaks us free from the need to personally settle any score or become vulnerable enough to be hurt again.  Some deep wounds will not be forgiven easily, we must lift up the Palmist heartfelt but theologically imperfect prayers. Such divine wrestling matches crack open doors of forgiveness.  Also, we will need others, the church, counsellors and deep colleagues, to help us with our deepest wounds.

Jesus tells us to forgive at 490 times. (Matthew 18:24) Every parent of a preschooler knows that you will forgive your children more than 490 times each week. You will say “in spite of that behavior, I love you”.  We only half- joked that Caleb found the boundary lines by crossing them. When our sweet little KB-Baby got an impish grin and wild glimmer in his eyes, you knew a transgression was coming. I remember watching Caleb load up a spoonful of sweet potatoes, raise it up high over his head, like a deranged lunch lady, only to bypass his mouth and slap the load of orange goodness right onto the tabletop- sending an orange mess onto the floor.  Delighted at his spoon mastery a triumphant grin filled his face. If you forgive about 490 times each week, that’s only 70 each day, or an act of forgiveness every 20 minutes!

Loving-forgiveness can hold us when wounds cut deep.  I have watched the hard labors of parents forgiving their not yet repentant children. I sat in the hospital room, with a frightened mother, watching her grown daughter’s whole body twitch with the spasms of violent drug withdrawal.  It defied words- so we sat there sharing the silence, which hummed below the beep of alarms. The room reeked with the worst smells of human pain. After sharing silence, the broken-hearted mother whispered, “people say cut her off- cut her off.  I can’t. I always hope this is the time she makes a new start. We can’t let her live on the streets.” Forgiveness is a deep hope. We might label or debate this mother's’ decisions, but we can not deny the depth of her “In-spite-of” Love. Love hopes.  Love risks heartbreak for love.

Doctor King tells us what happens when we hold onto resentment or unforgiveness:  “And I say to you, I have decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to (hu)mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. …  For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councillors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. …”God is love. When we hate we  do not know God, but when we love we hold the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality”

Around the holidays,  I sometimes spend time with a relative who is an amazing bomb tosser. She loves to stir up politics- either church or national.  I have been known to curse a fig tree after some conversations. A few years ago, I thought, “Maybe, I should try to minister to her. I am a professional minister after all”  I tried to practice the art of Jesus’ forgiveness.

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God… Blessed are you when people utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.  That is how prophets get treated! Be glad! Your reward is great in heaven! Turn the other cheek, absorb that insult! If you are angry with a brother or sister, you risk judgment; if you insult others maybe hell’s fire?  Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Shine like the children of God. Forgive and live inside forgiveness. “*

I broke the cycle of hitting back harder.  “Hitting back harder” is incompatible with Christian teaching.  I did not preach at her, but minister to her. I decided to go on, in spite of her,  releasing her and myself in the process. Now it is not perfect, she still lobs bombs, but I am freer.   To dine together without a sense of bitterness- without resentment- to feel a sense of going on together “in-spite of each other” is a deep release-sprung from forgiveness.

I pray our church be a place of “in-spite-of-each-other” we go along-together. Imperfectly sharing God’s work together. Perhaps, if we drink deeply enough of the divine forgiveness, we might learn to practice the art of forgiving and offer hope..

So let us practise the art of forgiveness, until through Jesus we master forgiveness, knowing that we will fail- so friends:  “Hear the good news: Christ has died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” and The congregation speaks forgiveness over the pastor saying “ In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.