

## Forgiveness

As Bonnie, Peter and I were sitting in the bleachers of the Calvin College gym waiting for Katharine's commencement service to begin I was delighted to see in the program that Lewis Smedes was going to be the commencement speaker. I have read some of Smedes' books and have seen him in Bill Moyer's PBS series on Genesis where he was one of the panelists. I had never seen or heard him in person, however, and I was looking forward to hearing him. I was not disappointed. He is a tall, white haired man with a kind face, a voice filled with compassion, and a sense of humor tinged with a twinkle of dry wit.

As he took the podium, he looked out over the crowd of several thousand and with deliberate speech he said to us:

Never lose hope.  
Never lose hope.  
Never lose hope.

He, of course, was echoing Winston Churchill's commencement speech at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri delivered shortly after the close of World War II. After a lengthy and eloquent introduction as one of the saviors of the free world, Churchill stood up, came to the podium, and gave what has become the most famous commencement speech ever delivered. He looked out over the audience with that signature scowl of his and said with the authenticity of a statesman who had led the world through its darkest hour:

Never give up.  
Never give up.  
Never give up.

And then he sat down. That was the whole speech. And it had been electrifying.

I want to begin this message in the same way Churchill gave his.

I want to begin with a rousing and spirit lifting challenge.

Always forgive.  
Always forgive.  
Always forgive.

Now I could follow the example of Churchill and sit down at this point, but the challenge I have just given to you is far more difficult than the challenge Churchill gave those graduating seniors five decades ago. For you see, when you are fighting to save a way of life, a home, a country, the free world there is a lot of incentive to never give up. Certainly there are times of discouragement and despair, but the stakes are so high that you instinctively know not to give up. Churchill stirred a natural impulse in the human heart when he exhorted, "Never give up. Never give up. Never give up." And there was little else that he needed to say.

But that is not the case with the challenge I have proclaimed to you. It needs to be developed where Churchill's message did not. You see, "Always forgive" cuts across the grain of our wounded hearts. When damage has been done to us, it is not our natural impulse to forgive. Our hearts are not automatically nor easily stirred toward reconciliation. When life has hurt us, when someone has victimized us, when dragons from the past rage, it is unthinkable in the midst of our pain to consider forgiveness. And it has always been this way.

Forgiveness was such a difficult challenge to the ancient Hebrews that their rabbis put limits on it. They said if someone offends you, if someone wrongs you, you are only obligated to forgive him or her seven times and after the seventh time you no longer have any duty to forgive that person. So you can imagine people's surprise when Peter came to Jesus one day and asked him, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

And Jesus answered, "Always forgive. Always forgive. Always forgive." That's what he meant when he said to Peter "I tell you,

not seven times, but seventy times seven times.” That expression in Aramaic is a way of saying that something is limitless. There is no end on how many times to forgive someone who has hurt you and who continues to hurt you. Always forgive.

Now that sticks in our craw. It doesn't go down well. Peter was seeking justification for an unforgiving spirit. Who knows who he had in mind or what hurt he was nursing in his soul. He was looking for a release from the responsibility of dealing with his offender in a forgiving way. And Jesus blew him out of the water by telling him, Peter, you will never be done with the work of forgiveness. You will never be excused from harboring an angry, resentful, bitter spirit toward those who have wronged you. There will never come a day when you will have the liberty to say, “That's the last time I'm going to have to forgive that person. I'm done with him/her.”

Always forgive. Always forgive. Always forgive.

That's what he said. It shocks and disturbs us, but that's what he said. Why has he laid that burden upon us? How can we do that? Where's the wisdom in it?

Now are you beginning to see why I couldn't sit down like Churchill did? There's a lot to unpack here. So let's get started by unpacking the first bag.

***The first bag is filled with the sins of those who have hurt us and for which we need to forgive them.***

One of the reasons I like Lewis Smedes is because he has written the two best books on the subject of forgiveness that are available. His first one is titled, ***Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve***, and his most recent one is called ***The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How***. They are absolutely the best on this subject and if you struggle with forgiveness I highly recommend that you get and read both of Smedes' books. They will help you enormously.

One of the things Lewis Smedes says is that forgiving happens in three stages: We discover the humanity of the person who wronged us, we surrender our right to get even, and we wish that person well.

When someone hurts us our first impulse is to demonize that person. We rob them of their imperfect humanity and make them into a perfect monster. It's just a lot easier to hate and despise someone who is a monster. Forgiveness cannot begin to be a possibility unless we are willing to admit that the person who wronged us is a fallible human being just as we are. Once we are able to give them their humanity back we become free to move to the next stage in which we surrender our right to get even.

Now this is a difficult stage and it is more difficult than rediscovering the humanity of the person who wronged us. Human or not, we still fantasize about getting even and we play out a thousand different scenarios of how we can engineer a pay back. Have you ever done that? I have. In one of our churches we had a man whose spiritual gift was offending me. I don't think I offend easily, but I honestly hated to see this guy coming. One day he really crossed the line. He wouldn't talk to me about his issues, so he dumped them all on Bonnie unkindly so and in public at a church event. And I was about as steamed as I ever get. Now I knew that I couldn't duke it out with him. That wouldn't be good. Just wouldn't be good. But I really wanted to get even with him. So that summer, every time I went golfing I always made sure that I used the golf ball in my bag named Ray. And I'd put old Ray down on that tee and say, “This one's for the Gipper, Ray,” and I'd smack him just as hard as I could. It was the best year of my golf game ever. I've never played so well as I did that summer. But eventually, I had to give up my right to get even with him. I was stuck in the toxic soup of my own anger. It wasn't healthy for me. So I eventually moved on to the third stage of forgiveness where I was finally able to wish him well again. When I got to that stage, I knew that my forgiving him had broken his hold on my heart and was free to move on joyously with life. He never knew what I did to cope with my anger. He never even knew I was angry. I just realized that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life whacking

golf balls that had people's names on them. God set me free. And through this experience I learned some important things about forgiveness that I would find Lewis Smedes writing about years later. I learned:

We can only forgive someone we blame.

We do our forgiving alone inside our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them.

The first person to benefit from forgiving is the one who does it.

We do not forgive because we are supposed to; we forgive when we are ready to be healed.

Waiting for someone to repent before we forgive is to surrender our future to the person who wronged us.

When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us. – The story re: Morrieaux, p. 24-25.

When we forgive we walk in stride with the forgiving God.

***The second bag is filled with the sins through which we have hurt others and for which we need their forgiveness.***

I wish we could spend more time unpacking this bag for there is a lot here to unpack. But today, I will have to limit my comments to just a few.

First, let me give you a memory verse assignment. Let me ask you to memorize 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (consequences and by-products of our sin)." Whenever we sin, confession is a needed to release us from the damaging effects of our sin. Our confession needs to include two important elements.

The first is repentance – A change of mind/heart. A turning in the opposite direction. We must come to a place in our heart where we no longer want to pursue a sinful path, a destructive attitude, or a private habit. Confession is saying, "Lord, I have done wrong. I have sinned against you and against other people in my life. I am sorry, and I want to turn away from what I've been doing."

The second is reconciliation. It is hard to think about reconciliation. If we have wronged someone else it is hard work to reconcile our relationship with that person. It's hard enough to have to say to God, "I have sinned. I messed up." It is even more difficult to go to the person we have hurt and say the same thing to them. Part of what Lewis Smedes calls the crisis of forgiving is the necessity of reconciliation. But, it is a necessary part of our healing process, as well as God's healing in the heart of the ones we have hurt. Jesus spoke to this issue in Matthew 5:23-24 when he said,

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." The authenticity of our relationship with God and our worship of him is tied to our willingness to be reconciled with those whom we have hurt.

***The third bag is filled with those sins for which God has forgiven us, but for which we have not been able to forgive ourselves.***

Many of us carry around a lot of pain and unhealed hurt because we have never been able to forgive ourselves for things we have done in our past. We do not have to be bad or evil people to do bad things. We are all guilty of words or deeds that have hurt others—sometimes deeply. And the more decent we are the more acutely we feel our pain for the hurts we have caused others. The problem is that our pain becomes our hate. The pain we cause other people becomes the hate we feel toward ourselves for having done them wrong. We judge, we convict, and we sentence ourselves, mostly in secret.

Some of us feel only a passive hatred for ourselves. We merely lack love's energy to bless ourselves and feel the joy of liberation from our self-condemnation. Others of us sink into aggressive hatred of ourselves, cutting ourselves up into little pieces with a fury of contempt. We are our own enemy, and sometimes in the ultimate tragedy this kind of aggressive self-hatred is acted out in self-destruction.

For still others that inner judge may be an unreasonable nag always nipping at the heels of your self-love and self-confidence with nagging reminders of what a lousy human being you are.

The real question is, if we have confessed our sin to God, and God has forgiven us, why can't we forgive ourselves? What is blocking us from experiencing the freedom and release of God's amazing grace?

Lewis Smedes suggests two reasons. First, he says we cannot experience God's forgiveness because we have never released ourselves from yesterday's scenario. We may have confessed our sin to God. We may have believed with our head and perhaps even with our heart that God has forgiven us, but a voice comes out of the past to keep alive the condemnation we felt for what we did. We cannot get released from it. We have not been able to see that whatever we did yesterday is not relevant to what we choose to be or do today. Even though we have been tried and acquitted at the foot of the cross of Jesus, we still stand in the condemnation we felt when first confronted and charged with our crime of sin.

Picture yourself in a court room. You are on trial for a sin of the spirit. The prosecuting attorney attempts to drag in some hoary detail from your past and your defense attorney objects on the grounds that the information being presented is irrelevant to the current case. The judge rules it inadmissible and won't allow it to be used against you. You sigh a sigh of great relief.

There is a wonderful verse in the Old Testament. It is Jeremiah 31:34 and the prophet is quoting God who says, "I will forgive

their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." I will remember their sin no more. What a great promise that is. It doesn't mean that God will somehow develop divine amnesia. This is a Hebrew expression that means literally, "I will no longer hold your sins against you." It is as if God was saying, "The sins of the past that you have confessed and I have forgiven are no longer relevant to your present day life. They are inadmissible evidence. I have archived them away in one of heaven's mammoth warehouses and I will no longer hold them against you. You are forgiven!"

One woman describes her struggle with self-forgiveness this way. She says whenever she does something she is not proud of—something that hurts someone else—her mind files it away in the same file folders that contain a lot of old hoary stuff from her past. So her latest fit of impatience, or lust, or greed gets filed away with old rap sheets that still cry out "Guilty, guilty, guilty." And she feels overwhelmed by the weight of all the condemnation in those bulging files folders. She says she is trying to learn how to let God archive the old files and put the fresh sins in new file folders so they can be dealt with without all the baggage of the past. God can help with that. He knows how to bury confessed sins in inactive files archived away in one of heaven's warehouses. He no longer holds them against us.

The second reason Lewis Smedes says we have trouble forgiving ourselves is that we have never allowed ourselves to move on to love's daring response. How do you do that? You go to the party. You confirm your outrageous act of self-forgiveness with a reckless act of love.

One day a woman dared to barge into a dinner party uninvited, plunked herself down at Jesus' feet and poured out a small cascade of love. Jesus explained to the flabbergasted guests and offended hosts, "She loves much because she has been forgiven much." Love is a signal that you have done it, that you have actually released the guilt that condemned you, that you have finally forgiven yourself. A free act of love. Like that of the woman to Jesus, may signal to you that you do, after all, have the power that

comes to anyone who is self-forgiving. So buy her a gift. Invite him to dinner. Visit someone who is sick. Put your arms around a friend you've never touched before. Write a letter of thanks. Or tell Dad that you love him. All of these are ways of confirming that we performed the miracle of forgiving ourselves.

Last week I shared with you a story of failure that tops any story you or I will ever have. It was the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. Someone shared with me after the message last week that for her any failure was a denial of Jesus which meant that all of our stories of failure are as bad as Peter's. Perhaps so. At least none of our stories of failure can ever be worse than Peter's denial of Jesus.

What I do know is that if only Matthew told Peter's story we might never have known how it turned out. But John tells the story too, and gives us the epilogue to it. Matthew tells us that Peter went out from Caiaphas' courtyard and wept bitterly after his third denial of Jesus. John tells us that after the crucifixion, even after the first reports that Jesus had risen from the grave, a lost and floundering Peter took some of the other disciples out for a fruitless all night fishing trip on the Sea of Galilee. The next morning as they were coming in with empty nets and sagging spirits, Peter noticed someone on the shore. He peered intently through the mist for the form of this man's body looked familiar. Suddenly, Peter cries out, "It's the Lord," jumps over board and swims to shore. Jesus has prepared breakfast for them and has been waiting for them to come in. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and they immediately catch a catch of fish so great that the nets tear as they haul them onto the boat.

After breakfast, Jesus speaks to Peter. John doesn't give us these details, but I like to imagine that they took a walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. "Peter, come walk with me." Jesus might have said. I can only imagine the lump Peter must have gotten in his throat and the butterflies he got in his stomach, the memory of his thrice-fold denial flooding back over his ashamed memory. But he goes with Jesus.

And Jesus asks him, "Peter, do you love me more than these others?"

"Yes, Lord," he replied, "you know that I am your friend."

"Then feed my lambs," returned Jesus. Then he said for the second time, "Peter, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," returned Peter. "You know that I am your friend."

"Then care for my sheep," replied Jesus. Then for the third time, Jesus spoke to him and said, "Peter, are you my friend?"

Peter was deeply hurt because Jesus' third question to him was, "Are you my friend?", and he said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I am your friend."

I remember when I was in college struggling with God's call on my life to make a deeper commitment to him. I had been counseling with one of the professors who had tried mightily to help me take the next step on my spiritual journey, but I just wasn't making much progress—I hadn't been able to break through. Then, one day in my senior year I was sitting in my astronomy class struggling with God's pull on my life. And as I sat there waiting for the class to begin I stared out the window across the sunlit campus, and I remembered this wonderful story of Jesus and Peter on the beach at Galilee. I had read it recently in J. B. Phillips paraphrase and it was fresh in my mind. I especially liked the way Phillips rendered Peter's last exchange with Jesus:

Peter was deeply hurt because Jesus' third question to him was "Are you my friend?", and he said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I am your friend."

And as I thought that through again it occurred to me that Jesus had deliberately and gently and firmly backed Peter into a corner so that he could help Peter realize that deep down where it really

counts he truly did love Jesus. The Lord washed away Peter's three denials by leading him to make three professions of love.

"Lord, you know everything. You know that I am your friend."

And then in my head and in my heart, I heard God asking me, "Don, do you love me? Don, do you love me? Don, are you my friend?" And Peter's answer became my answer, "Lord, you know everything. You know the wanderings of my heart. You know the weaknesses of my faith. You know all there is to know about me. And in that knowledge of me, you know that deep deep down I love you with everything I've got, everything I am, and everything I ever hope to be."

And that day, in senior astronomy class, a strategic foundation stone was laid down in my life. God gently prodded my heart into realizing the depth of his love for me and the depth of my love for him. And the surety of that realization has made it possible over all these years for me to forgive myself when I know that God has forgiven me. If the Lord could restore Peter, then there is hope for me.

And there's hope for you as well my friend. No matter whether the baggage that is keeping you from forgiveness is

an angry heart that can't forgive those who've hurt you,

or a stubborn heart that is keeping you from seeking the forgiveness you need from someone you've hurt,

or a wounded heart that makes it impossible for you to forgive yourself,

God can help you unpack that baggage.

He can unwind the tangled threads of unforgiveness in your heart and set you free. He can unlock the door of hate or bitterness that imprisons you in a cell of stony alienation. He can ready your heart to forgive as a part of his healing touch in your life.

The place where we often get stuck is that we don't really know what to do with our anger at those who have hurt us, or the pride that won't allow us to repent and seek forgiveness from others, or the gaping wounds that seal us off from cleansing self-forgiveness. But today, I want to invite you to do something that has the power to get you unstuck from these things. I want to invite you to give your sticking points to God.

On the card you received please write:

The name or initials of someone you are having a hard time forgiving for what they have done to you.

The name or initials of someone whose forgiveness you know you need to seek. Or

A word or two about the thing for which you simply have not been able to forgive yourself.

You, of course, can put more than one of these on your card. If actually writing a person's name or a description of some sin is too threatening or uncomfortable for you, just mark an X on the card. Only you will know what it stands for. No one else will see your card. What you put on it is between you and God, but in a few moments we are going to give you an opportunity to do something with your card that may be the start of God setting you free and setting loose in your life the power of forgiveness. Now, while you're working on your cards, we've got a song for you to listen to. Its message is that everything's been done so that you would respond to God's invitation to come to him..

Friends, everything was done so that you would come to the Father. Broken hearts, broken lives, he will take them all. He invites you to come this morning and nail your sins, your burdens, your baggage, the places where you are stuck in unforgiveness—nail them to the cross. Give them to Jesus. That's why he died for you—so that you and I would know without a doubt that he was

absolutely serious when he said to Peter, “Always forgive. Always forgive. Always forgive.”

As you think about this invitation I want you to listen to a song that assures you that everything was done so that you could come.

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Forgiving is a journey; the deeper the wound, the longer the journey.