

9April17 Sermon **FORGIVENESS: Your Cleansing Breath**

April's worship theme is "rebirth and starting over." That seems especially appropriate for this week. Tomorrow the Jain religion celebrates Mahavir Jayanti, the birthday of Lord Mahavira, their founder. Starting Tuesday and continuing through Thursday the world's Theravadan Buddhists celebrate New Year

This week also begins Passover for Jews and Holy Week for non-orthodox Christians. Holy Week, the quintessential celebration of rebirth and starting over with Christians celebrating the expiational death of Jesus on the cross, dying for the forgiveness of humanity's sins, and his subsequent resurrection providing humanity with a new hope of forgiveness for our supposed debased human condition.

Setting aside the notion that our natural-born human condition is debased, the gospel story of the passion, death and resurrection is the foundation of two Western beliefs about forgiveness and restoration: The first is that it is transactional, the second that it is conditional. Transactional in that the offended party has a right to expect the offender to seek pardon. Conditional in that offended party can expect some sort of penance and restitution from the offender, and without that can withhold forgiveness.

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, forgiveness of sins happens through priestly mediation. In the Protestant tradition it happens through one's confession directly to god without an intermediary priest. But in both traditions the essence is the same: the granting of forgiveness is conditional upon the offender's expression of remorse and petition for pardon.

It seems so self evident, so common sense. It's certainly the common notion. That's why we're stunned in the face of the Nickel Mine Amish who forgave the killer of their children. We're in almost dazed awe at the forgiveness shown to Dylan Roof by the survivors and next of kin of his massacre of African Americans in their Charleston church. The remorseless killers sought no pardon and offered no restitution – as if there could be any. Yet the victims forgave.

We rightly see in the survivors of these two mass murders a heroic level of compassion. But do we also see that we have a false belief that forgiveness must be transactional and conditional? But still, why surrender that common sense notion?

Those forgiving souls in Nickel Mine PA, and Charleston SC would say that's God's will. They might, for example, cite the gospel of Luke 6:27 which has Jesus saying

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back ... love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.

Or they might cite Deuteronomy 32:25

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them."

Or how about we just say it's good for you – for you -- like a cleansing breath. Just listen to the experts.

Dr. Robert Enright, founder of the International Forgiveness Institute has been researching forgiveness since 1985. Summarizing the research from five different studies on populations of mixed gender and age, Enright notes: "Those who learn to forgive improve their physical health, lower anxiety, lower psychological depression, lower anger, increase a sense of well-being, increase self-esteem, and increase hope."

There's a most interesting, ongoing study of wronged or victimized people, being conducted by Dr Fred Luskin, director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford. He reports that serenity, ie "having no resentment left," does NOT come through any act of forgiving. In fact, all subjects reported that the more they tried to forgive in some formal, conscious or organized way, the harder it became and the more resentment they felt. What worked was to stop working at forgiving and "*just let it go.*"

That certainly was my experience in the wake of maybe the worst time of my life -- the winter/spring of 1963. Sometime early that winter and continuing through to the end of June, I was shunned, ostracized by my class.

I was fat-shamed ; I was called "the devil" and classmates would make a 2-horned sign (like this) whenever they saw me.

During those bleak months only 2 classmates, Jim and Frank, would have anything to do with me, and only Frank had the courage to actually be seen with me.

I counted the days till our 2 month summer break at home, and I seriously considered not going back. But go back I did, though fearing that things would pick up where they left off. Thankfully, and to my great relief, it didn't.

In fact, there was no mention of it. No reason, no apology given for it. It was as though it had never happened. Except for the hole in my heart where confidence was not replaced by bewilderment, worry, and a fierce independence.

Fast forward some 13 years. I had by then left the seminary and the religious order, and was living in Hatboro doing my dissertation research. One weekend my old seminary friend, Jim – the friend of little courage – was up from Baltimore visiting. He had left the order by then, too. As the weekend drew to a close, Jim gave me two gifts. The first was “Changes In Latitudes,” my first Jimmy Buffet album – yes, I'm a minor league 'parrothead' – and the other was telling me the reason behind the torture I suffered those many years ago.

The “why” is a story of classmates' misjudging something I did, and their misguided righteousness. The specifics aren't worth telling. But very much worth telling is what Chris asked when she heard the story.

“Did they ever apologize,” she asked, “and did you ever forgive them?”

Good questions.

Had I forgiven? The short answer was no, or at least not then. That would happen sometime between Jim's visit in 1976 and 2003 – 40 years after the event!

One problem back then was that I was still in denial about the impact of the experience. Jim's call and visit came out of the blue. I would never have reached out to him, because when I left, I put those years in a vault and locked the door tight!

Then came 9/11 and the vault door was blown off!

One of my old classmates, Matt Ryan, was a FDNY battalion chief and died a hero in the collapse of South Tower. Like many other classmates, I attended Matty's memorial service – classmates none of whom I had seen since 1969 (Jim Wienholt had himself died a number of years before). At Matty's memorial service in New York we agreed to

get together again a year later, ie in the summer of 2003, but this time at our old seminary on the Lake Erie shore.

I went and it was revelatory.

We talked about our lives since leaving. We joked about the quirks of some of our old professors. "We talked about the old times and drank ourselves some beers ... still crazy after all these years," as the Paul Simon song goes. The conversations at some point turned to how much we looked forward to going back to the seminary at the end of each summer. Or in my case NOT, which set me apart and surprised them. And I surprised them all the more when I reminded them of the shunning. Though sad to hear of it, none of them even remembered it – none -- including the classmate who had instigated it; and though saddened, no one apologized, they merely expressed regret.

You know what? That was alright with me, because sometime in the quarter century since Jim's visit and that reunion, I had let it go. I had "released the wound, but retained the wisdom – the learning" as they say in Polynesian cultures. I had moved on with my life and wasn't imprisoned by that old anger. I had chosen to see it as the product of their very immature self-righteousness. After all, we had just been kids. Now I was free to enjoy their stories and pictures of family and children. I was even open to the idea of getting together again, as I've done several times over the years.

Oh, and in a bit of schadenfreude, I really enjoyed discovering that most of them now tipped the scale more than me – some much more than me! The turnabout seemed fair.

I did have one regret, though, namely that it took me so long to reach "Ok."

And this brings me back to Dr Fred Luskin, of the Forgiveness Project, and his research with people who felt hurt, wronged and victimized. According to Luskin, his research shows that one can learn to forgive – to let it go – much more quickly by practicing 9 steps. While difficult, he assures that taking these steps promise to bring about greater understanding, awareness, and can equip an individual with the tools necessary to forgive and move on. Those 9 steps are:

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a trusted couple of people about your experience.

2. Do what you have to do to feel better.

3. Forgiveness is for you; not for anyone else. Forgiveness does not have to mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace.

4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you two minutes – or ten years – ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.

5. Practice some simple stress management technique as soon as you feel upset to soothe your body's flight or fight response.

6. Give up expecting things from other people that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can only hope for health, love, peace and prosperity and work hard to get them.

7. Look for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.

8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power.

9. Rewrite your grievance story to remind you of your heroic choice to forgive.

Furthermore, it seems that if you preemptively forgive someone, that person often senses it and feels less uncomfortable around you, even if you never discuss it. They can become able to see you without being haunted by the thought of the hurt they caused in you. Your presence no longer reminds them of their own feelings and failings. And they can stop blaming you for sparking their own discomfort or guilt. Even if your forgiveness does not always have a perceptible impact they might be capable of engaging and changing in the future.

By embracing preemptive forgiveness and letting go the thought, or the requirement, of prior apology we can better create the possibility for exactly that as a consequence. As we embrace the change of our own heart, and see forgiveness not as the end point but rather the ground of – the starting point – of a process, then with time and with love and with luck we can find authentic reconciliation as the outcome.

Meditative Invitation

And so, in closing, let's take a moment to quietly reflect. First acknowledge the shame or disappointment that we deserve to forgive ourselves for. And second acknowledge that anger toward someone else that we hold onto. Take this quiet moment to accept these frailties of our humanness and to begin to forgive – begin to let it go.

Blessed be.