“The Code of Forgiveness”
August 17, 2025

Isaiah 1:10-20
Psalm 130
Luke 18:9-14

This morning I’m resuming my sermon series exploring the Psalms. And, as you know if you’ve been around, I’m using Paul Simon’s album from a couple of years ago, *Seven Psalms*, as a starting point.

This fourth Sunday of the series is where it begins to get difficult—and that’s usually where it begins to get interesting as well. Today we come to the difficult and interesting Psalms that speak of the forgiveness of God.

We sang a version of Psalm 30, which affirms: “God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favor is for a lifetime.” Together we read Psalm 130, which encourages us: “With God there is steadfast love and with God is great power to redeem.” These and other Psalms tell us that while we know the sin that is separation from God, others, and ourselves, we are not abandoned. We find hope and power for living in the forgiveness of God—the ability to begin anew.

The fourth of Simon’s seven psalms is titled simply “Your Forgiveness.” In it he sings:

> In sorrow, a beautiful song
> Lives in the heart and sings for all
> Your forgiveness
>
> Inside the digital mind
> A homeless soul ponders the code
> Of forgiveness

He continues, sounding a little like the Apostle Paul:

> And I, the last in the line
> Hoping the gates won't be closed
> Before Your forgiveness

Then there are lyrics that seem to me to echo both the call of Isaiah: “Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean,” and the forgiveness of baptism:

> Dip your hand in Heaven's waters
> God's imagination
> Dip your hand in Heaven's waters
> All of life's abundance in a
> Drop of condensation
> Dip your hand in Heaven's waters

All these beautiful, evocative words express the search for and the hope of forgiveness that are central to all scripture, not just the Psalms. We listened this morning as Isaiah spoke of the entire nation of ancient Israel standing in dire need of forgiveness and of God's promise of the same. We listened as Jesus told of two people praying, one of whom received the mercy sought for, hoped for.

But Simon also sings: "I, I have my reasons to doubt"—an expression of the difficulty that forgiveness, or even the *idea* of forgiveness, presents.

Many people do not want to think about forgiveness in these days.

Who can speak of forgiveness in the face of the devastation after nearly three years of the Russian assault on Ukraine?

Who can speak of forgiveness in the face of the death and destruction that Israel has wrought on Gaza in the wake of the heinous attack by Hamas?

Does anyone watching people in Iowa ambushed by masked ICE agents talk of forgiveness?

Revenge? Revenge is popular. Miles Taylor, former Department of Homeland Security chief of staff in the first Trump administration, says even he's surprised by the "breakneck pace" at which democracy is being dismantled in the name of revenge.

Revenge is popular.

Forgiveness, not so much.

I, I have my reasons to doubt.

We all do.

I once preached a sermon in another church that spoke about God's great, loving forgiveness. As I greeted people after worship, several of them said things like: "Nice sermon."

But Eunice, dear Eunice, came up, looked me straight in the eye and said: "How can you say something like that?" I think she wanted to know if it was either bone-headed, hard-hearted insensitivity or simply unthinking flakiness that led me to talk like that from the pulpit.

"How can you say that?"

When a minister stands in the pulpit and starts saying that God forgives *everyone*, the trouble begins.

We imagine that it must be pretty easy, really, for God to forgive someone like us. Perhaps you understand the tongue-in-cheek comment of Krister Stendahl, the late dean at Harvard Divinity School and Lutheran Bishop of Sweden. In talking about the theological belief that Christians are all sinners, he added, with his characteristic wit, "Of course, we are only honorary sinners."[i]

Easily forgiven, honorary sinners that we are, when we start thinking of the sins of others, well, that's a different question.

You will say it isn't fair for God to forgive those who are cruel and hateful, abusive and murderous, those whose crimes are great, who have caused so much suffering for so many people. And I will agree with you.

You will ask what becomes of God's justice, God's judgment, if everyone is let off the hook. And I will wonder with you.

You will say if God is so forgiving, what's to keep us from doing whatever we want, no matter how sinful, how hurtful. And I will worry with you that the answer is: "Nothing at all."

Let's be honest: Forgiveness is one of the more troubling characteristics of God.

As I said, this is where things get difficult.

Our faith speaks of forgiveness: At the heart of the universe is a power that understands that human beings are imperfect, limited in our abilities, finite—*fallen*, to speak theologically. And *even more*, this power will allow us to continue, will offer us the opportunity to stumble and get up and try again, to stumble and get up and try again.

The Psalmist cries out: "There is forgiveness with you, O LORD." This is what we both hope and fear.

Recall, then, the parable of Jesus that we heard this morning.

Let's start with the tax collector.

The tax collector has a self-awareness that most people lack. He recognizes his alienation from God.

Certainly, all those around him would be aware of just what a despicable character he was. He has come to a new understanding of himself, however.

Look at him as he comes to pray. As one person put it, he is "overwhelmed by the bitter sense of his distance from God. He and his family are in a hopeless position, since for him repentance involves, not only the abandonment of his sinful way of life [as a tax collector] but also the restitution of his fraudulent gains…Not only is his situation hopeless, but even his cry for mercy [is hopeless]."[ii]

In this state of despair he does not even pray as one should. He stands far off, separate from the community. It would be customary to pray with eyes open, looking upward, as if to the God beyond all things. But this tax collector does not even look up to heaven. He beats his breast—or we would better say, his heart, which was regarded at the time, not as the place of love but as the seat of sin.

His stance and his actions suggest a person who is both completely alienated from God and at the same time utterly dependent upon God—that is to say, a person very much like each one of us.

We might say that his condition is an experience of the Cross. The Cross after all is that place of human forsakenness, of unbridgeable distance between the creature and the source of life that is the Creator. And at the same time the Cross is that place where we are most aware of our deep need for that source of life above all else.

In his hopelessness, the tax collector recognizes his alienation from God. All he can do is cry out for mercy.

The Pharisee is just the opposite. He is certain and self-assured. He knows his standing in the larger scheme of things and his posture shows it. Standing, he looks up and extends his arms. He expresses his gratitude toward God. "God, I thank you…" he begins.

The Pharisee knows where he stands. Often enough, we have such certainty as well.

And yet, Jesus says, the tax collector went home justified.

"Justified" is one of those words that we don't use very often any more—and especially in a positive sense. We talk about attempts to "justify" the use of torture, or to "justify" polluting our rivers. It has become a word that suggests excuses and rationalization.

But we can also, "justify" the type on a page of paper. In this way all full lines on a page are of equal length and flush on both the right and left hand margins. All the letters are in right relationship with the page and with each other.

And maybe that helps us in recovering the positive religious sense of this word.

To say that the tax collector is justified is to say that he is brought into a right relationship–with God, with other people, even with himself. To say that God justifies him—or us—is to affirm that God works in our lives not because of who we are but because of who God is.

So, Jesus warns against thinking that we are among the righteous and regarding others with contempt. Righteous is another one of those words that we avoid. As with "justified" so "righteous" is also a word that describes not an individual alone but one individual in relationship with another. Whatever upholds a relationship—understanding, respect, compassion, love, mercy—whatever upholds a relationship is righteous.

The tax collector, miserable as he is, discovers in his misery a new relationship. He is accepted by the God whose very nature is love. He knows mercy. He discovers the courage to change his life and find a new relationship with his neighbors—as impossible as that might have seemed. He is justified, set in a new and right relationship.

This is the always astonishing way of God with human beings: accompanying us even at those points where we feel most abandoned; giving mercy at those times when we feel most forsaken; doing a new thing when the old has become worn and exhausted; bringing new life when death—in all its forms—surrounds us.

This is the always astonishing way of God with human beings: helping us to face the reality that overwhelms us and to still "learn to do good and seek what is right; helping to seek meaning in the face of all that depresses; helping us to confess our own guilt even as we continue to seek the good.

This points to the what might be the code of forgiveness: If we are to become forgiving people, we must first find the courage to live as those who are forgiven, to recognize and accept our finitude, our failures, our fallenness and still live in the fullness of God's love.

One person put it this way: "We are guilty of many things. Inaction, dishonesty, selfishness. Yet, we are forgiven for these sins. We struggle to find meaning in the world. Yet, God is still there. We worry about the future. Yet, we continue to fight for it."[iii]

If we can live in the courage that we are forgiven people; if, as Paul Simon hoped, the gate to forgiveness is not closed, if we dip our hands in heaven's waters, God's imagination, we might begin to be those who forgive as we have been forgiven.

The French philosopher, Vladimir Jankélévitch, in his thin yet very dense book, *Forgiveness*, arrives at a troubling conclusion: "In one sense, forgiveness extends to infinity…Which amounts to saying: there is an inexcusable, but there is not an unforgiveable. Forgiveness is there to forgive precisely what no excuse would know how to excuse.[iv]

There is an inexcusable, but there is not an unforgiveable.

When we truly forgive we are not saying that what the other person did was "all right" or that it didn't matter. In fact, Miroslav Volf says that "to forgive is to blame."

God's forgiveness is difficult.

Our forgiveness is difficult as well.

As people of faith, we might grow in forgiveness by opening ourselves to the forgiving love of God.

There is forgiveness with God. Let us wait for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

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[i] Stendahl, quoted by Marcus Borg in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, pg. 64, note 18.
[ii] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. 1972, pg. 143.
[iii] Nathan Olsen, "The Courage to Be: Against Guilt." https://www.movement.org.uk/blog/courage-be-against-guilt
[iv] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, pg. 157.