

“The Limits of Forgiveness”
April 24, 2022

John 20:19-31

The lesson from the Gospel of John that we just heard is often read on this second Sunday of the Easter season. It is fitting, as it tells of events that happened a week after Easter.

But as I read the story this year, I was struck by its beginning—by the account of what happens when the risen Christ appears to his followers in the evening on that first Easter Sunday.

So, let’s leave the story of Thomas for another Sunday, another year, and watch and listen as the risen Christ comes to the disciples with both a message of peace and the gift of forgiveness. Peace, forgiveness and resurrection seem to be a package deal.

Let us give some consideration to all three.

The novelist and minister, Frederick Buechner, says: “When somebody you’ve wronged forgives you, you’re spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience.

“When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.

For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other’s presence.”

I like that image of being at peace inside my own skin, because often enough I haven’t been. I’ve known times when I’ve needed to be forgiven. I’ve known times when I’ve needed to forgive. I’ve experienced both the dull throb of a guilty conscience and the corrosion of bitterness.

How do we find forgiveness and the peace that it promises?

We can begin that search with the resurrection.

With the resurrection of Jesus, his followers understood that something new had begun. And they needed new ways of talking.

How do you speak of an event that changes everything when everything seems the same?

How do you talk about something unique—something that had never happened before and has not happened since?

Some early Christians seized on the idea of a new creation.

Their Jewish tradition told them that in seven days God created all that is and, seeing the goodness of creation, rested. On the Sunday of the resurrection—the eighth day—God started a new creation in raising Jesus from the dead. Just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human being, so the risen Christ breathes new life, a *holy* spirit into the disciples.

New creation speaks of reconciliation—of relationships being set right.

New creation is connected to forgiveness—what God offers us, what we can offer to others.

On the day of the new creation, on the day of resurrection, the risen Christ sends the disciples into the world with a mission and with the energy of the Holy Spirit. Part of that mission involves forgiving the sins of others.

Yes, some acts of forgiveness are easier than others.

A friend forgives the way you slighted them last week. You forgive your friend's quick temper.

Parents forgive a teenager for disobeying the rules and staying out too late. Yes, they're probably grounded, too.

Some acts of forgiveness are relatively easy.

Some acts of forgiveness are much more difficult.

There are times when bearing a grudge feels better than letting go, aren't there? Times when thinking of someone who has wronged you almost feels good because of the self-righteous feeling it gives. It can be difficult to forgive just because it feels so good to be hurt and angry.

There are times when parents find it hard to forgive children. And there are times when children—of any age—find it hard to forgive their parents. So much is expected of family members: fulfill my broken dreams, live up to my expectations, be like God for me.

Forgiveness in families often comes when each family member is seen as an individual, with their own needs, their own life, their own peculiar way of navigating along the dangerous river of living. Families need forgiveness, but it doesn't always come easily. Sometimes it doesn't come at all.

There are times when forgiveness can only come about by understanding the other person. This is when forgiving gets a little more difficult, because the last thing many people want to do is understand or empathize with someone who has hurt them. Still, understanding does move people a long way toward forgiveness.

Some acts of forgiveness are easy.

Others are much more difficult.

And then there are occasions calling for forgiveness that stretch us to our limits as human beings.

What about someone who doesn't ask to be forgiven?

What about those whose offense is so great?

What about the brutality of a nation?

We're pushing to the limits here, aren't we?

At the limits of my ability to forgive I begin to understand who I am.

And I begin to learn about who God is as well.

Many people have said at some point: "I just can't forgive that person for what they did, no matter how hard I try." Perhaps you have said this.

Usually, such words are spoken, not out of self-righteousness, but with regret, with anguish. They give voice to an uneasy sense of failure and faithlessness: "As a Christian I know I *should* forgive—but I can't."

"As a Christian." That's where the problem starts, isn't it? If we weren't trying to follow the One who taught us to pray "forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," we might not be as troubled. If we weren't disciples of the One who sent people out to announce the good news of God's forgiving love, well, it just might not matter as much if we could forgive or not.

"I can't forgive..."

And so, some live with a burden of guilt. In addition to bearing the wounds that call for forgiveness, they also bear the guilt of not being able to forgive.

Some live with hatred. Over time, the bitterness begins to feel as comfortable as an easy chair.

There must be a better way.

Maybe we can start with the honest and hope-filled words of Desmond Tutu, the late Anglican archbishop who knew firsthand the abuse and oppression of apartheid in South Africa. He tells us: "To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger."

Before judging ourselves, let's consider the place where we actually are: hurting human beings, wounded by the acts of other people.

Someone has done something that hurt grievously.

At times like these, people cry out: "I can't forgive."

Of course not.

Of course not.

At times like these people are hurting too much to forgive. They are thinking of themselves, feeling their loss.

Start there:

As a finite human being unable to do all that you want to do;

Unable to be all that you want to be.

Start as one forgiven—yes, still forgiven by God—but not able to forgive.

Human forgiveness is a discovery most often unearthed while we are living in the pain of being ourselves: I can't forgive. I hurt too much. I'm too angry.

Maybe so.

But maybe I haven't hurt enough—maybe I haven't hurt honestly, openly in a community of trustworthy people. May I haven't released the anger that gnaws away inside.

A woman reflecting on her divorce said: "My growing awareness of the certitude of God's love gave me the courage to face my anger. It was very difficult to forgive my former husband. Finally, I shared my anger with him. Only then did I begin to feel some compassion for him. As I struggled to forgive, I realized that forgiveness was a process, not a simple, one-time act of will. I had to acknowledge my own feeling in order for forgiveness to be authentic."

Remember your experience of being wronged? For many, it's a feeling of being totally rejected. It's as though your entire self were put in the balance and found wanting. There is a sense of monumental inadequacy: "I simply am not enough as a person to inspire intense and steadfast love, to ensure and secure my own place."

Withholding forgiveness is a last defense available against further rejection and loss. And so, we remain connected to those who have hurt us. It might be a connection filled with rage and self-righteousness. Yes, but at least this way we're not alone, alone in the universe, alone before God, alone with ourselves—and unable to cope.

To begin the process of forgiveness is to feel that rejection, that loss, that inadequacy. It is to understand, not just someone else, but yourself. It is to embrace your own human limitations in giving and receiving love. Here I stand: finite, limited, unable to do it all.

At its limits, to forgive is to admit our powerlessness either to give to another person—or to prompt in another—the miracle of forgiveness. At its limits, we begin to see the limitless God, still calling us into a new creation.

The community of the church—and each of us individually—are given God's Spirit, which among other things is a Spirit of forgiveness. It is a part of the new creation that God began in the risen Christ.

Here and there that creation becomes visible in our lives: we see those who have wronged us as finite creatures, distorted, as we are, by sin, no better and no worse, no higher and no lower than ourselves. We identify with the humanity of others and know in our hearts that we could have done the same wrong, inflicted the same injury upon them that was inflicted upon us.

Here and there, God's new creation remains to be seen: places where we can't forgive; places where forgiveness seems humanly impossible.

Yet even there—even at our limits as human beings—we catch a glimpse of the Creator who is beyond our limits, the God with a caring face who loves those whom we cannot, who forgives those whom we cannot. We catch a glimpse of the God who loves and forgives us even when we can neither love nor forgive.

God still breathes into us the breath of new life, the energy of the Holy Spirit.

We are a new creation, slowly learning to love and by God's grace at times even finding and giving forgiveness. At the limits of forgiveness, we see once more the unlimited love of God, making us a new creation in Christ.