

Growing up with two sisters, you might think I didn’t experience much conflict, but you’d be wrong. Having a twin sister is both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because no matter where I lived, no matter what school I went to I always had a friend; and a curse because we spent so much time together that we could get on each other’s nerves quite quickly, especially when we got older. From an early age I quickly learned that forgiveness can be hard, particularly for those closest to us. Whether it was having to apologize for wrongs I felt I hadn’t committed or forgive my sisters for slights that I didn’t want to forgive, my parents engrained within me the need for reconciliation, the need to apologize and to forgive, the need to be penitent and reformed. Don’t get me wrong, I laud my parents for making this a priority – forgiveness and reconciliation are essential parts of human relationships – but as a child it seemed like I just had to say sorry, or I just had to forgive my sisters who said sorry to me. Forgiveness was a simple matter of saying the right words, making sure the other person heard them and moving on, either as if nothing had happened or taking time to process what had happened. I have often caught myself with my eldest daughter just having her say sorry, even if she doesn’t understand what she is saying sorry for and then moving on. In some ways the forgiveness that children exhibit is that simple, children have a knack for not holding grudges, and they have a knack for moving beyond slights and hurts as if they had never happened. The same children that were fighting in the playground one moment tears, screams and all, will be happily playing with one another the next moment as if nothing had ever happened. For children forgiveness as a concept can be foreign, if you try to explain it to them they don’t understand why it needs to be done, but in practice it is rather simple they want to be reconciled with one another so that they can continue having fun, so that they can continue enjoying one another’s company.

Today we conclude our preaching series on the Lord’s Prayer, and at the heart of this prayer, this prayer that is meant to be the family prayer of God’s family is forgiveness, a forgiveness that is paradoxically both easy and hard. Today, we turn our attention to the final and perhaps most important petitions of this rich and deep prayer “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” There is a quiet simplicity to this petition, there is no formula or stipulations as to who we should or shouldn’t forgive it is merely a prayer asking God to help us with forgiving all those who have sinned, trespassed or who are indebted to us.

Forgiveness isn’t a particularly easy thing, we talk about it every week at church but I imagine for many of us forgiveness is difficult – both to receive and to give. Forgiveness is hard work: when we are the offended or the hurt party it requires us to move beyond the hurt or offence and a desire to be restored or reconciled with the person who hurt or offended us. It requires us to trust once more the person who broke our trust, it requires us to work to restore our relationship. If we are the one who has hurt or offended someone it might seem like forgiveness is easy, after all we receive forgiveness, but I would argue that receiving forgiveness is also difficult, because we have to recognize the need to be forgiven, we have to recognize we are wrong, we have to realize that we need the relationship to be reconciled and sometimes we have to come around to forgiving ourselves. And perhaps that is part of the reason Jesus invites us to pray about forgiveness every time we use this prayer, both for ourselves and that we might forgive others. Prayer is powerful, it can change us and those around us particularly when it comes to forgiveness.

Our Gospel passage today highlights both the simplicity and the difficulty of forgiveness. Our passage from Matthew today, comes in the midst of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God, receiving it like children and his teachings about community. Our passage follows immediately from Jesus’ teaching about the lost sheep and how the church should deal with persistent sinners. In response to these teachings Peter asks Jesus what is the appropriate number of times to forgive another member of the church that sins against him. Peter offers up a number, 7, which, to many of us would seem rather generous. If someone committed the same hurt or offense to me over and over again, I doubt I would even make it anywhere close to seven before I had written off reconciliation as impossible. And yet Jesus’ response to Peter is “not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times.” The magnitude of this number is only grasped when we realize that in Jewish tradition this sort of multiplying of numbers was not meant to be taken literally, but rather as a sign of infinity, Jesus is therefore telling Peter that there should be no limit to number of times he should forgive his brother or sister in Christ, in fact he must always be prepared to extend forgiveness and seek reconciliation.

This is difficult to hear, it is difficult to hear Jesus teach us that forgiveness should be offered infinitely that we should always be ready for reconciliation. After all this passage and passages like it have been used to convince many battered women to return to their abusers forgiving them, and so I want to examine more deeply what it means to forgive both for the person who is offering forgiveness as well as for the person receiving it.

We get a glimpse into this in the parable Jesus tells in the second part of the Gospel passage we read today. In this parable we hear the story of a king who was settling his debts and when one of his slaves who owed him vast sums of money couldn't pay, he ordered him and all his family and possessions sold so that the king might recoup some of his debts. In desperation the slave begs for mercy, asking for merely more time, and after hearing the slave's plea, the king is merciful and not only gives him more time but forgives him the entire sum of his debt. A marvellous act of generosity and mercy that should have changed the man for ever, and yet the minute he leaves his audience with the king he comes upon a fellow slave who owed him a rather paltry sum of money, and instead of being merciful he imprisons the fellow slave until he is able to pay the debt he owes. After hearing this, the king summons the first slave and orders him to be imprisoned until he is able to pay his original debt because he was wicked and unmerciful to his fellow slave.

The actions of the King at the end of the story might seem harsh, but the first slave has not lived into the forgiveness the King has offered. The forgiveness that the King offered should have changed the man's entire life, the grace he experienced at the hands of the king should have been extended to his own debtor. When we have hurt or offended someone, forgiveness can only truly happen if we are changed by that forgiveness, if our lives are transformed by the grace that someone offers to us. Forgiveness is like a partnered dance: it only works when both partners are working together. For forgiveness to lead to restoration and reconciliation there must be change, there must be a willingness to receive and be transformed by the forgiveness, otherwise it is as if we have not received that forgiveness. For a battered woman to forgive their abusive husband, something has to change, something in the relationship has to change, and sometimes that means getting out of the relationship; forgiveness does not mean subjecting ourselves over and over again to hurts of another, but rather forgiveness means the willingness to be truly reconciled when the other is ready to embrace the grace of forgiveness.

When we pray forgive us our sins/trespasses, we forgive those who sin/trespass against us, we are reminded that we need to be constantly reconciled to God, and that we need to bear the fruit of that forgiveness in our lives. What does it profit us to claim the forgiveness of God, if we are unable to live out the forgiveness we receive? In that event we are like the wicked slave, and find ourselves functionally rejecting the grace and mercy of God, we find ourselves unchanged by the power of God's forgiveness.

And this is why at the heart of God's family prayer, Jesus gives us these words to pray day-in and day-out. At the heart of this prayer is the reminder that we are all reliant on God's grace and forgiveness, at the heart of this prayer is the reminder that while we all fall short of the glory of God, through the power of Christ we are able to achieve reconciliation, we are able to return again and again to well of forgiveness. Over time as we pray this prayer with intentionality we live more fully into the forgiveness of God, wrought for us in the Cross of Jesus; as we pray this prayer over time we lay claim to the forgiveness of God and through it are able to seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In conclusion I want to share a story that highlights the power of prayer and forgiveness: Corrie Ten Boom is a remarkable woman who risked her own life to save the lives of others during the Holocaust. She worked in her family's business as a watchmaker. After the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, Ten Boom and her family became involved with the Resistance, providing shelter for Jews. A false wall was built in her bedroom to provide a hiding place for those seeking shelter.

On February 28, 1944, the Gestapo, on the basis of information obtained through an informant, raided the Ten Boom home and the family was arrested. Those who were hiding in the home at the time were able to avoid detection and escape. Sadly, Ten Boom's father died a few days after the arrest.

Ten Boom and her sister, Betsy, were deported to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp in September 1944. It was there at Ravensbrueck that Betsy died in December of that same year. Later that same month, Ten Boom narrowly escaped death herself when she was mistakenly released from Ravensbrueck due to a clerical error. Her release came just days before all the women her age were killed.

While at a church service in Munich, she came face-to-face with one of the former Ravensbrueck prison guards. Ten Boom had just delivered a message of God's forgiveness and the former guard, not recognizing her, asked Ten Boom personally for forgiveness for the atrocities that he had committed. Ten Boom struggled within herself and found that she could not forgive him, but as he stood there she prayed for the strength to forgive this man who had caused her such pain and anguish and in the moment she found she was able to lay claim to the reconciliation of God, and shake the man's hand and offer him sincere words of forgiveness.

Prayer is powerful, it transforms our lives if only we allow it to. I pray that we all might live into the forgiveness that God offers to us in his Son Jesus Christ. Amen.