

## Understanding, Acceptance, and Forgiveness

Sermon on 6/3/12 given by Dan Hardt

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord. Amen.

When Pastor Jeong asked me to give a sermon today, I asked him if he had a topic he wanted me to use. He said that during May his topics would be about the congregation's role in pastoral care, and a sermon about forgiveness would be helpful. That was fine with me, because forgiveness, in one form or another, has been important in my own life and is something that came up repeatedly with nearly every psychological therapy client I've worked with. Also, as I've slowly learned, it's a crucial part of our everyday lives. One of my big steps toward learning concepts like forgiveness came as I worked on my doctoral degree in counseling psychology. But more about that in a moment.

Forgiveness can be more complicated than just saying "I forgive you" to someone. Why is it that it can be fairly easy (not easy, but fairly easy) to forgive the wife or husband or best friend that you love very much when that person does something hurtful? And why can it be much harder if the hurt is caused by a co-worker or a cousin you don't see very often or the friend of a friend? I began to understand all that in 1979, 32 years ago, over the second weekend in August. I had been transferred to Puerto Rico in 1970 for a two-year period but instead stayed there nearly 10 years. I loved living there—the people, the job, the weather, the water. It has continued to be one of the most important periods of my life. I had been successful and was promoted twice. But it was now time to leave. On Friday morning the employees gave me a going-away party; that afternoon I flew back to Indianapolis, where the company headquarters is. On Monday morning I started my new job, working for a man named Bob. He and I had known each other socially before I moved to Puerto Rico but had never clicked. There hadn't been any conflicts, but we hadn't really been friends. That first Monday morning I went to his office to say hello. He motioned toward a chair, so I sat down. He leaned forward across his desk and said, "I'm going to fire you." No "Hello", no "How was your trip?" Just "I'm going to fire you.", although his actual words weren't quite that pleasant.

Needless to say, I was totally confused. I could think of nothing to say, so I left his office. And the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. In the space of one plane flight I went from being happy and successful to being an angry loser. Each morning, as I pulled into the parking lot, I got angry all over again. It wasn't

my finest hour. After 20 years of working hard, doing many different jobs that I really liked, my career was going to end with being fired. As it turned out, that didn't actually happen, but the thought consumed me. I might have forgiven him then, but I couldn't. I wasn't able to. Little by little, I went downhill. To make matters worse, my mother died 4 months after that awful August and my father died 10 months after she had passed away. I was able to concentrate enough at work to do a good job, but the depression became serious. Fortunately, three people held my hand: a company physician, my Methodist pastor, and a Presbyterian minister who had also become a marvelous psychotherapist. They gave me the hope I needed. And God was there, too, helping me pay attention to the many good things in my life along with all the troubles.

Four years later I learned some things about Bob. His father had been a company vice president and had an ugly reputation. He was rude, abusive, threatening, belittling, uncaring, and several more unpleasant words. He tolerated nothing but himself. And this description partially fit Bob, because he was living what he had learned as a child. In addition, Bob was the youngest person ever promoted to that executive level, and sometimes it felt like he knew he was in over his head. But during that memorable August weekend, I knew little about Bob.

Learning that information slowly led me to change my opinion of him. It had felt like he was out to get me, but I realized that he would have been out to get anyone who threatened him—and I had a reputation for being successful. The information about Bob helped me understand and accept what had happened. I learned that much of what was going on I was doing to myself, and I had to stop that. There was still a thoroughly unpleasant side to each day, but Bob's actions no longer ate away at my insides, which had quite literally been happening. With the support of a friend who was a higher-level executive than Bob, I was able to retire a year early. That led me to a second weekend adventure; but this time it had a very happy ending: On Friday, my last day working for the company, I was once again given a going-away party, and on Monday I drove to Bloomington, Indiana and started my doctoral program—a marvelous adventure that has changed my life. And it wouldn't have happened without Bob's threat to fire me.

How does that story relate to today's sermon? Gaining knowledge about Bob—and about life—helped me develop a new understanding of what had happened. He was simply modeling the behavior of his father, someone he had trusted as a child. He was living what he had learned as he grew up, and I was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another piece of the puzzle also became clear: I could accept Bob

even though I didn't agree with him. This new understanding led me to accept Bob and his actions. After I accepted him for who he is, and understood why he is what he is, then I could forgive him. It wasn't hard—but it took 4 years. I didn't like his behavior or agree with it—I thought it was very wrong—but I could still accept him. Learning how to change his behavior was his job, not mine. But I finally understood what might be happening inside me.

There are other pieces of the forgiveness story as well. Willingness to listen, and feeling safe enough to be open, are a couple of them. But those are for another sermon. Today I want to focus on a piece that probably affects most of us at some point in our lives. It's called shame. In an instant I went from success to failure, and I wasn't supposed to be a failure. My father was a brilliant and highly successful man. He was widely known and respected in his field. And I had done something wrong again, the same way it happened when I was a child. I didn't live up to the expectations that I (and my father) had for me. He never said anything about my failure, of course. It was all in my own head. But it was real. I was ashamed of myself. How could I make up that failure to my wife? What worth did I have now to my children? My friends would fall away after they saw me for the failure I now was. What would my parents say? How could I undo that damage? Most of those things didn't happen, of course, but they were still real. And it was all in my own head.

Shame is a terrible thing. It can destroy us. It can quite literally eat away our insides. Being guilty of doing something wrong is bad enough, but the shame from violating our own rules and values is far worse. Don't good mothers always make delicious meals, even when they're exhausted, and don't they always know how to say just the right thing? And aren't fathers always able to support their families well, and can't they always teach the kids how to be the best at sports and how to repair the house? We see it happen that way in movies, don't we?

I spent many years working at a VA Mental Health Clinic. Shame is a severe problem there, but it's pretty common everywhere. Since the brains of young children aren't able to process and understand much of what goes on around them, they blame themselves when things go wrong. If Mom or Dad screams or hits, children are likely to blame themselves because they must have done something wrong. Mom and Dad must be right because they feed me and keep me safe. So I must have been wrong. This can lead children to have unmanageable loads of shame. As adults, we need to watch for times when children might feel ashamed and help them realize they are OK and still worth loving.

After we've grown up, we can still find ways to blame ourselves. If the shame is strong enough, it can appear to be unforgivable. And when that happens, we can make ourselves unforgivable in our own eyes. The hardest person for you to forgive is yourself and the hardest person for me to forgive is myself. If we can't forgive ourselves, we won't be able to live full, happy lives. My guess is that this happened to my boss, Bob. But we don't need to practice psychology to forgive. We only need to truly listen to what people say, to understand their views of what is going on. We especially need to pay attention to their feelings. As the old saying goes, we need to walk a mile in their shoes. Then we will have enough information to understand them and accept them as they are. It can be done, and it doesn't need to take 4 years.

Acceptance doesn't mean agreeing with what the other person is doing, and that makes the act of forgiveness less complicated and more straightforward. We don't have to agree that the offending behavior is correct, even if the other person insists it's OK, and this allows us to forgive and keep on loving the other person. Peter asked Jesus how many times we need to forgive someone who sins against us, and Jesus replied, "I tell you, not seven but seventy seven times." We don't know if we'll ever need to forgive someone else seventy-seven times, but certainly we can do it once or twice or three times. That's what loving is all about. And in addition, we need to be ready to forgive ourselves seventy-seven times.

So where does all this take us? Back to the title of the sermon: Understanding, Acceptance, and Forgiveness. As Pastor Jeong told us during his May sermons, Forgiveness is a crucial part of living and loving. It is what the Bible teaches us again and again. You remember: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; Love thy neighbor as thyself (or, if you change it slightly to focus on the ideas about shame, then say, love yourself, and love thy neighbor as thyself). But before we can forgive, we must learn to accept. The way we learn to accept is by understanding. And we should try to understand both others and ourselves. Yes, I have done many things I wish I hadn't done. I've acted without thinking, especially when I opened my mouth instead of listening. But Christ died for our sins, for the forgiveness of our sins. If He can forgive us, maybe we can do some understanding and accepting and forgiving, too.

Amen.