

“The High Cost of Forgiveness”

Matthew 26:20-30

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Communion Devotion

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of forgiveness in healthy relationships. None of us is perfect, which means all of us say and do things that undermine our relationships. Without forgiveness, these relationships will not survive.

It appears Matthew recognized the value of forgiveness and gave it a prominent place in his description of the Last Supper. Let me point it out to you.

Matthew’s account of the Last Supper is brief. It includes just one conversation Jesus and the disciples had before Jesus passed the bread and cup around the table.

It is the topic of that conversation that is interesting and intriguing. It focused entirely upon betrayal. Listen to the way this dialogue began.

“And while they were eating, Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.’” (Matthew 26:21)

The disciples appeared to be in shock, and each one asked Jesus if he was the betrayer. Ultimately, Judas was revealed to be the culprit, but he doesn’t abruptly leave the room as he does in other gospel accounts.

He remains with the disciples and hears Jesus say, “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many **for the forgiveness of sins.**” (Matthew 26:28)

Matthew is the only gospel writer to include that final phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins.” **Why did he add it?**

Perhaps he had two reasons. One was to show his readers that Jesus’ willingness to forgive those who hurt him included betrayal by one of his own disciples. Could anything have been more painful for Jesus than what Judas did to him later that night in the Garden of Gethsemane?

The other reason was to remind his readers that forgiveness comes with a price, and it is usually a high one. Forgiveness always involves sacrifice.

Read Matthew’s account of the Last Supper carefully. Do you see the connection between betrayal, sacrifice and forgiveness and the order in which they are arranged? I do, and it speaks to me clearly about the scope, the power and the price of forgiveness.

There is no sin Jesus refused to forgive, including betrayal by one of his own disciples, and Jesus was willing to make sacrifices in order to grant forgiveness and to make a bad situation better. He would take the initiative to repair and to restore broken relationships.

I don’t think Matthew’s purpose in writing his account of the Last Supper was lost on his readers. He sent a clear message to them about the importance of forgiveness in maintaining healthy relationships.

At the same time, he wanted them to understand that forgiving others would not be easy. It would require making sacrifices and doing things that don’t come naturally to them.

They would need God’s help to resist their human tendencies to hold grudges and retaliate and to make the sacrifices necessary to open the door for redemption and reconciliation. Telling this story the way he did was Matthew’s way of encouraging his readers to rely upon the Holy Spirit to help them follow Jesus’ example.

I am grateful for this gift Matthew has given us. I needed to hear it and suspect you did, too.

It is common for people to confide in me about how hard it is to forgive someone who has hurt them. Sometimes they sound surprised when they say it, as if it just dawned on them that there is no easy way to forgive someone.

Deep down, all of us wish forgiving others was easy. At times, we deceive ourselves by thinking it will get easier if we wait a while.

That time never comes, does it? This is because forgiving someone who has wronged us is contrary to human nature.

Forgiveness is not the usual response to betrayal, broken promises, bullying, abuse or mistreatment of any kind. Retaliation is.

Jesus repeatedly condemned this reaction, didn't he? He said it would only make a bad situation worse. He called, instead, for his disciples to forgive their enemies and to seek a path forward that would heal the wounds of both the victim and the offender and bring estranged people together.

Why did Jesus do this? Why was Jesus adamant about his disciples forgiving people instead of seeking retribution? He knew it was the only way to break the vicious cycle of anger, hatred, resentment and hostility so prevalent in society. Nothing short of forgiveness and reconciliation would pave a new path forward.

Jesus also knew forgiveness was the only way to heal broken relationships. This is because forgiveness has the power to bring the best out in everyone, offender and victim. It makes hope visible in ways nothing else can.

Last week, Cynthia sent the staff a devotional from Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan friar and inspirational speaker and author. This particular devotion came from his book, [Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps](#).

Let me share a sentence from that devotional that spoke to me as I was formulating my thoughts for today's sermon. "God does not love us IF we can change. God loves us SO we can change."

The kind of love that leads people to forgive those who have hurt them is truly transformative. When someone who has done wrong sees the sacrifices others are making on his or her behalf, knowing they don't deserve it, the potential for changes in their behavior go up dramatically.

This kind of love is both influential and irresistible. It can melt even the coldest hearts.

I believe there was another reason Jesus insisted on his disciples forgiving those who hurt them. He knew it was impossible to nurse a grudge and heal their broken hearts at the same time.

Joy, happiness, peace, gratitude and love cannot co-exist with the toxic feelings associated with hatred. Unresolved anger, bitterness, resentment and hostility will swallow them up.

This all sounds well and good, but how do we forgive others when everything inside us says not to do it? To be candid with you, I don't believe we can, at least not on our own. We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to lead, guide and empower us.

Others can compassionately listen as we express our disappointment and dismay over someone's betrayal or broken promises. They can give us permission to vent our feelings of anger and resentment that can lead to vengeance and then offer sound advice on how to handle these strong emotions. They can help us to see that forgiveness is not the same as denying what happened to us or condoning bad behavior, but a necessary step to moving in a new direction.

Only God, however, can help us turn from becoming a toxic person who makes a bad situation worse and move toward becoming a responsible person who wants to resolve conflict and heal wounds. Only God can accompany us to the cemetery of broken dreams and help us bury our disappointments so we can move on with our life. Only God can make this kind of hope visible and possible.

Will you let God become a part of your healing process? Will you allow God to walk with you on this journey toward hope and healing? Will you let God do for you what he did for Jesus as you choose to deal with difficult people in constructive and redemptive ways?

Pray about this as the bread and cup are passed this morning.