

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Sermon: Magic Eyes** Matthew 18:21-35

It never lets up, does it? For those of you who have been keeping up on the lectionary readings for the last few weeks, you will have heard repeatedly about the need to get along as the family of Christ: to love one another, to uphold one another. And we keep running up against one of the essentials of how we are to relate to one another: the command to forgive. We hear the wisdom of Scripture, and we nod and say, "Yes, that's right, we need to forgive." But then we run smack dab into real life, and our hearts and minds cry out like Peter: "How on earth am I going to do this? And do I have to keep on forgiving, again and again?" And God's answer doesn't leave us any wiggle room: *We have to forgive, and we have to keep on forgiving, so many times that we will no longer be able to keep track.* And man, is that hard!

I don't think there's much in Scripture that is asked of us that is harder than this. It goes against our every instinct: the instinct to hit back when someone hits us, to make others hurt the way we hurt, to snarl, and struggle and lash out when we feel threatened. Forgiveness is not a quality that comes naturally to any human being. And yet it is clearly required of us as Christian people. The Lord's Prayer says "Forgive us our trespasses [or sins, or debts] as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, the prayer we pray every single week is one that asks God to forgive us in the same measure that we forgive others. And in case we didn't get the point, the parable from Matthew's gospel makes it abundantly clear: if we want God's forgiveness, we absolutely, positively, **MUST** forgive. It is not an option!

But what about your ex-best-friend, who told everybody your most precious secret? What about the bully who made your life miserable at school? What about your friend or brother or wife – the one who, when they're not drinking, asks forgiveness and tries to make up for what they've done, and then falls off the wagon and does the same things all over again? What about your spouse, who cheated on you and now wants to come back? Do you have to forgive them? The answer is "Yes."

It's not any easier for me to say that than it is for you to hear it. I'd like a little wiggle room as well. But we're just not given any! A few years ago, I was having a really hard time forgiving someone who had hurt me badly. Months after it had happened, I finally pulled out a book and read it: A book called "Forgive and forget: How to heal the hurts you don't deserve" by Lewis Smedes. I thought it might be helpful if I could give you some practical tips on forgiveness today. So what follows is taken from Smedes's book, which I highly recommend to you.

Let's start with a story:

*Fouke was a righteous man – the kind who always does the right thing and expects the same from everyone else. He was so righteous that he drove people away from him. Fouke had a wife named Hilda, who had a warm, inviting personality, and drew people to her. Hilda respected and loved her righteous husband, as much as he allowed her to; but one day, Hilda's longing for something more than this cold righteousness led her to have an affair with another man. Fouke discovered the affair, but rather than tossing his wife out, he said he forgave her, as the Bible said he should. But he didn't, really. He hated her for betraying him, a righteous man, and he punished her with his righteous mercy.*

*But Fouke's fakery didn't sit well in heaven. So each time Fouke would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble into Fouke's heart. And each time a pebble landed in his heart he would feel a pain – a pain like he felt the first time he came upon Hilda feeding her hungry heart in the arms of another. Fouke became so weighed down by the pain of stones he carried in his heart, that he wanted to die. The angel who had dropped the pebbles came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt.*

*The only remedy was that Fouke receive the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that would look at Hilda, not as a wife who had betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed something he had not given her. Only by looking through those magic eyes could he heal the pain he felt in his heart.*

*Fouke protested: "Nothing can change the past. Hilda is guilty, and even an angel can't change that fact." "Yes," the angel agreed. "You cannot change the past – you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past." "How can I get these magic eyes?" asked Fouke. And the angel replied, "Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you look at Hilda through these magic eyes, a pebble will be lifted from you."*

*Fouke couldn't manage to ask right away – but the pain of his heart finally drove him to it, and he received the gift of magic eyes. And little by little Hilda began to change in front of Fouke's eyes. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him, instead of as a wicked woman who had betrayed him. And the angel kept his promise: Fouke's heart grew lighter, and his pain grew less, and he invited Hilda back into his heart, and together they began a new journey.*

The gift of forgiveness is the gift of magic eyes. Forgiveness has four stages: Feeling the pain that has been done to us; feeling the hate toward those who have caused that pain; healing the memory of that pain; and then coming together in new relationship. It's important to note that forgiveness is not denying the hurt or the wrong that has been done. It is not tolerating the intolerable or accepting the unacceptable, or making excuses for each other, or covering up the conflict. Forgiveness requires the realisation of deeply personal, undeserved, and unfair pain. Carrying that pain around in one's heart produces hatred and bitterness – a passive hate that is unable to wish the person who has hurt us well, or an active hate that wants to hurt as much as we have been hurt – and may actually act on those impulses. Feeling that hatred is natural – but carrying it for too long is destructive.

When you forgive someone for hurting you, you perform spiritual surgery inside your soul – you cut away the harm that has been done to you and let it go, and you begin to see the person who has hurt you through those "magic eyes." We gain new insight into the people who have hurt us – an insight which allows us to see them as people who are a mixed bag, just like we are.

This new insight may bring with it a change of feeling toward the other. The harm they have done to you becomes irrelevant to how you feel about them now. This is what Scripture speaks of when God says: "I will forgive their transgressions and remember their sins no more." Does God have amnesia? No! It is just that the sins of the past have no bearing on how God feels about us today. This is how the "magic eyes" of forgiveness can change our feeling toward people who have hurt us. You will know that you have begun to forgive when you can think of the person you once hated and resented, and wish them well.

Forgiveness does not come easily. It comes slowly, and takes time. You may think you have forgiven someone, and then months later, all those feelings come flooding back, and you find you have to pick up that hard work of forgiveness once again. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, though in time you may find that the details of what happened between you grow fuzzy or unimportant. Forgiveness does not always happen perfectly – we may only ever be able to forgive partially – but we shouldn't deny ourselves the gift of healing even partial forgiveness can bring. And forgiveness does not always guarantee the re-building of a broken relationship. A person may not even want your forgiveness, or they may have passed away, or the one who has hurt you may be a faceless stranger. In such cases, relationship cannot be rebuilt.

In other cases, a new relationship is a possibility. But it requires certain things. One of them is truthfulness. Any attempt to deny or lessen the harm that has been done is a poor foundation to build on. The person who has inflicted hurt needs to recognise the harm, be willing to listen to your experience of that harm, to understand it, and to feel the hurt that you have felt. They must promise not to hurt you again, and you need to believe that they intend to keep that promise. There are, of course, no guarantees: we humans are fallible creatures. And it may be that you may only be able to come together in a limited kind of way, because the hurt is just too deep. But the intention must be there not to inflict hurt again.

As I said, forgiveness does not come quickly or easily. It goes against our innate sense of fairness and justice. But it is the only thing that can heal that deep pain we carry around in our souls – the pain that erupts into cycles of revenge and violence far too often; the pain that can become such a heavy burden we wish we were dead. Forgiveness comes with a little bit of understanding: beginning to see people as people with all kinds of influences in their lives who make poor choices just like we do; it can come in confusion: not completely understanding what happened between you and what you hope for in the future; it can even come with some left over anger! It is not wrong to still be angry, even when you have forgiven. Anger is a recognition of the truth of the injustice that has been done to you, and a guard against allowing it to happen again. You can be angry and still forgive!

You will likely find you need to forgive a little bit at a time – and no-one, not even this preacher, can tell you that you have to forgive a certain hurt. I can urge you to consider the healing that forgiveness brings, but if you forgive, it must be freely, or not at all. It often comes out of a deep recognition of your own need for forgiveness and the feeling that comes with having received this forgiveness, sometimes from God, and sometimes from another person. That total affirmation of who you are, that act of love, empowers other acts of love and mercy in you.

Forgiveness, as Lewis Smedes puts it, is love's revolution against unfair pain. It heals the human heart, can restore relationship, and ends the cycle of bitterness and revenge. Forgiveness is love's ultimate power. So it is that Jesus, whose life and death and resurrection were fuelled by God's unending love, insists on forgiveness. And it's why those who have received forgiveness and fail to forgive are condemned so harshly in today's Scripture. In God's eyes, sinners refusing to forgive sinners just makes no sense! If you have received love, you should extend love – that's what Jesus says. That 's what God intends.

Loving people is risky; committing to relationships of any kinds brings with it the possibility of hurt - and forgiving such hurt is hard. But if you want to find healing in your heart and healing in your relationships, this is the place to go.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest arts of human living, so don't feel discouraged if you find it really, really tough. Instead, ask yourself this: Is my usual response to being hurt an attempt to get even, or a wish to forgive? If you always want to go for the jugular, if you always nurse your bitterness or anger, then you're in trouble. But if you are trying to forgive, even if you only manage it in fits and starts, you are part of a miracle.

It's a quiet miracle, and one that no-one else may ever notice - but a miracle, nonetheless. Keep trying, and keep praying for God to help you. Ask God for the gift of those magic eyes. Let the work of forgiveness happen in you - and be a part of one of God's greatest miracles. Amen