

Sermon by Ted Mosebach  
First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
East Hartford, Connecticut

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### Forgiveness

(First in series, "What Did Jesus Say?")  
(Suggested topics for Lent from the congregation.)

Matthew 18:15-22

This morning's sermon is the first in a series this Lent which is an experiment in congregational participation. Previously, preaching topics have not been suggested from the congregation, and from time to time I have wondered if what was said from the pulpit was as relevant to others as to me. From what I can learn from other preachers, many have often felt the same way.

The sermon this morning is in response to a suggestion by a member of the congregation that the topic be forgiveness. The idea was submitted as a written question: "In today's world, are you required to always forgive someone?" What did Jesus say?

Well, the first admission to make is that not only did Jesus not say anything about forgiveness in today's world. Jesus never said anything in particular about today's world at all. No where in his recorded teachings did he say anything about any situation in the world that would exist two thousand years later. The question about the relevance of biblical teaching for today is a fair one. There are indeed some biblical teachings that are no longer applicable in the modern world. The Bible is what is known as a progressive revelation. In other words, its truth was revealed over a thousand years of ancient Middle Eastern history. Even within the Bible's own pages there are indications that what it taught at one time was no longer applicable in another. For instance, in the Old Testament, God says to Moses in the book of Exodus, *(God) keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression of sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation. (Exodus 34:7)* A similar idea is expressed in the book of Lamentations written at the time of the Babylonian exile: *Our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities. (Lamentations 5:7)* And yet in the book of the prophet Ezekiel we have these contrary words:

*What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?" As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all*

*lives are mine, the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. (Ezekiel 18:3-4)*

The Ezekiel passage then continues for the next twenty verses to emphasize the point that God punishes no child for the sins of the parents, although for sure we know that in this world the consequences of the parents' sins are sometimes, indeed, born by the children. The point Ezekiel makes is that when the children suffer for the sins of the parents it is not punishment from God. In addition, no child need ever think that because his or her parents were of a dissipated character therefore the child must be as well. Spiritual life is not passed down through the generations as if it were in the gene pool, nor is spiritual emptiness.

Another early teaching of scripture refuted later on in the Bible is about this morning's topic of forgiveness. The Law of Moses mandates equal recompense of offense for offense. In the book of Leviticus we have this statute. *Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is to be the injury suffered. (Leviticus 24:19)* But centuries later Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

*You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38,39)*

A few lines later Jesus goes on: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44,45)*

All of this is to say that it is a fine thing to wonder if something that the Bible says is still applicable in today's world. If everything without exception that was ever written in the Bible is still relevant for Christians today we might not be forgiving anyone of anything but rather living by the Law of Moses and seeking to break bones and gouge out eyes and knock out teeth.

So let us ask, what about forgiveness today, in today's world, in the world of terrorism and mass murder and child abuse and human trafficking? When Jesus says to love our enemies, does that mean terrorists too? And when he says, as our gospel reading this morning brings to us, that we are to forgive someone not just even seven times, but seventy times seven, which surely implies forgiveness without limit, are we still to follow that in this world of horrors in which we live now?

Well, first of all, the severity of the inhumanity that plagues the world is not new. It is no worse than other times, no better, surely, but no worse either. Is it worse now than when chattel slavery was legal? Is it worse now than when people were thrown into the arena to be torn to pieces by lions to the cheers and laughter of the crowd? Is it worse

now than when good Christian people were burned alive at the stake by other Christian people because they disagreed about theology? Is it worse now than when Jesus was crucified and he forgave his torturers from the cross? No, it is not worse now, but how far should forgiveness go in any century, including the 21<sup>st</sup>, and what really is the forgiveness that Jesus taught?

Perhaps we might begin at what forgiveness does not mean. Forgiveness does not mean tolerance of evil. It does not mean that we just let evil go if we have the means to stop it. It does not mean that we do not defend ourselves against it. But surely it does mean, at least, that we do not return it in kind. We do not return evil for evil. We do all that we can, as Paul writes to the church in Rome, *to conquer evil with good!* (*Romans 12:21*)

As forgiveness does not mean simply to tolerate evil it also means not to let it consume us with hatred. There is a marvelous organization with its beginning in England called The Forgiveness Project. The Forgiveness Project consists of people who have been victims of sometimes terrible crimes but who have determined not to let the horrors they have suffered to turn them cold. There is story after story in the Forgiveness Project of people who have over time been able to forgive their tormentors for the sake of the victim's quality of life as well as for the perpetrator. I am going to share one now and if you are interested in reading more I recommend that you Google, The Forgiveness Project, to encounter others.

**On a cold night in November 12, 2004 six teenagers in Ronkonkoma, New York bought a 20 pound turkey with a stolen credit card. While driving on Sunrise Highway, 18 year-old Ryan Cushing threw the frozen bird out the back window just for a thrill. The turkey hit Victoria Ruvolo's car, shattering the windshield and smashed into her face. She was taken to the hospital with life-threatening injuries. She awoke several weeks later with no knowledge of what had happened.**

When I looked in the mirror, I could see it was me but my whole face was smashed in and every single bone in my face was broken. I had no idea I'd had ten hours of surgery and I was shocked when the doctors told me that from now on, for the rest of my life, I would always have three titanium plates in my left cheek, one in my right cheek, and I'd also have a wire mesh holding my left eye in place because my left eye socket was so badly shattered.

Once I got off the medication, I remember lying in the bedroom at my sister's house and just crying myself to sleep and asking: Why me God? What did I ever do so wrong and so terrible in my life that I deserved all this to happen to me? And I'd cry myself to sleep. But then, gradually, it began to dawn on me that perhaps God had allowed me to live through this ordeal because I was in such great physical condition. The idea that it had happened for a reason - and that I had saved someone else who might not have been able to survive - helped me get through rehabilitation.

Then the District Attorney informed me that the other teenagers who had been with Ryan had entered a plea bargain to testify against him. This, coupled with overwhelming evidence, was enough to put Ryan in jail for 25 years. It was at this point that I started asking questions about Ryan. I wanted to know what type of kid would do this? Had he always been a bully? Was he always hurting other people? What could possibly have built up inside him so bad that he had to throw something so hard? Because I'd experienced the death of two brothers when I was much younger, I felt strongly that I didn't want to be responsible for taking this other young person's life. I didn't want Ryan to rot in jail.

That's when I asked to meet with Ryan's lawyer to be able to tell him that I wanted an amnesty for Ryan or at least a lesser sentence.

On the day we went to court, I saw this young man walk in wearing a suit which looked like it was three times too big for him; it made him seem so frail. He walked in with his head hung down and looked so upset with himself. When I saw him there, my heart went out to him. To me he looked like a lost soul.

Once the case was over and it was time for him to walk out, he started veering over towards where I was sitting and every court officer was ready to jump on him. They had no idea why he was coming towards me but as he walked over to where I was sitting and stood in front of me, I saw that all he was doing was crying, crying profusely. He looked at me and said, 'I never meant this to happen to you, I prayed for you every day. I'm so glad you're doing well.' Then this motherly instinct just came over me and all I could do was take him and cuddle him like a child and tell him 'just do something good with your life, take this experience and do something good with your life.'

Because I asked for amnesty for Ryan, he received a six-month prison sentence with five years probation of community service and psychiatric help. Some people couldn't understand why I'd done this but I felt God had given me a second chance and I wanted to pass it on. I know I did the right thing. Kids like Ryan don't think about what they do. They think they're invincible and everything will be OK. They don't think about how every action has a reaction.

*For his community service Ryan was directed to speak to youth in a program that, Robert Goldman, JD, Psy.D., supervising psychologist for the Suffolk County Probation Department, created. When he finished his one year of community service Ryan volunteered to continue for another three years. Victoria is now working with Dr. Goldman speaking to youth about the importance of forgiveness. They have recently co-authored a book titled, No Room For Vengeance in Justice and Healing.*

When Jesus said that we are to forgive without limit he did not give us an easy instruction. Forgiveness is sometimes a very difficult thing. That is why this suggested

topic is such a profound one, and so important. I don't know if I could have done what Victoria Ruvolo did. But I so want to be like my Savior and be able to do it.

I have need of so much forgiveness from God and the people in my life that without it I would have no loving relationships now at all. Perhaps the same could be said for all of us. No, I am not a terrorist or violent criminal, but I have done things that have pained others. Every sin ultimately pains someone. That is why it is a sin. And others have hurt me. I want to forgive them all, even if I have not yet been able to do so, for my sake, and for theirs. It is my only hope, it is their only hope, and it is the only hope of the world. That is why Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem one final time determined to face the crucifixion that awaited him there. That is why he forgave the thief hanging next to him and even those who pounded the nails into his wrists. That is why his Name now is lifted above all other names, and why he deserves our love and devotion and worship.

*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

[theforgivenessproject.com/stories/Victoria-Ruvolo-USA](http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/Victoria-Ruvolo-USA). Web. 26 March, 2012.

Scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version