

Preaching Forgiveness

Amy P. McCullough

Grace United Methodist Church, Baltimore, Maryland

Imagine a young man has begun attending the church you serve. He comes to the early service, finding a pew to himself amid the sparsely filled sanctuary. He slips out before the benediction so you have little opportunity to learn his name. It is a surprise, then, the Sunday he stops to make an appointment to speak with you during the week. On the scheduled day, he arrives at your office door. "I've come seeking some pastoral counsel," he begins. "Fifteen years ago, I left my hometown to accept a position at the place where I am currently employed. When I left, I said good riddance to my grandparents who had raised me after my mother's death. My father was not in the picture. My grandparents never hid the fact they felt burdened by a second round of parenting. They weren't just strict; they were harsh, about the rules, the discipline, the chores, and the expectations. I don't remember much affection from them. Hardly ever an 'I love you.' Things deteriorated when I graduated from high school and decided to become an artist. They said straight away that they would never accept my choice. They tried everything they could to change my mind: incentives to go to a "real" college, lectures, disparaging comments about my ear-ringing, and threats of withdrawing their financial support. When I couldn't take it any longer, I left. I moved here. I worked my way through art school and also found a job. Now I paint part time and work as an associate director of a local YMCA. I organize afterschool programs and summer camps for kids. I ensure that every child enrolled in our activities learns new skills, makes good friends, and benefits from a healthy environment. I've sold some of my work and displayed others in local shows. I am proud of the life I have built here.

"I went to church as a kid," he continues, "but I stopped when I moved away. Church reminded me of the shame I was trying to escape. About a year ago I started waking up on Sunday mornings really missing worship. I am glad to have found your church. The sanctuary is beautiful. It is quiet and peaceful. The hymns sound familiar, and the Bible readings remind me of Sunday school years ago. I have been listening to your sermons over the past few months, and because of your preaching, I have realized I want to forgive my grandparents for the pain they inflicted upon me. The damage they did is something I still carry. They haven't changed and they probably never will, but I can't shake this feeling of wanting to make peace, which means I will need to forgive them. I have decided to move back to my hometown. I want to see what might happen if we interact on a regular basis. I turned in my resignation at work and gave notice at my apartment complex. The moving truck is scheduled for the end of the month. Tell me, pastor, do you think I am doing the right thing?"

If you are the pastor sitting alongside your parishioner as he tells his story, perhaps you respond with a sense of incredulity and awe. It is an admirable idea to imagine forgiveness in such a pain-filled situation. It is courageous to even hope for reconciliation in the face of rejection by those entrusted to love. But exactly how realistic is this young man's plan? Does he understand the depth of his risk? Can forgiveness occur without an apology, never mind a full confession by those who committed the injury? Can reconciliation happen when only one party attempts to make amends?

Isn't it likely his return home will be disappointing at best and at worse a recreation of all his old injuries? Equally perplexing is his claim that your preaching has stroked the desire to forgive. What did you say? What did he hear? A quick mental review of recent Sundays does not uncover a specific sermon on forgiveness. Yet clearly something of God's ability to reconcile the world has been conveyed to one feeling alienated, damaged, and ashamed. He points to the sermon as compelling him towards Jesus' command to forgive as you have been forgiven. How is it that one preaches forgiveness?

Moving amid the daily work of teaching, administering, and visiting, every pastor encounters individuals struggling to forgive. Situations crying out for reconciliation are obvious at the hospital bedside when a person shouts, "I'm so angry at God for letting my wife die," or at a community meeting when would-be homeowners confront redlining lenders. Human relationships are riddled with estrangements and suspicion, filled with unhealed hurts and persistent inequalities. These messy, wounding situations accompany the pastor when he or she preaches. The hospital visit or community confrontation comes to mind while writing the sermon or jolts back into view when looking out across the congregation. Those listening in pews haven't forgotten the visit or the meeting either. They receive the sermon through the lens of their own unresolved pain. Hence, the brokenness of life ushers the question of forgiveness into the sermon without any formal introduction. The day's scripture reading begins, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt," and the woman in the back pew recalls her sister to whom she hasn't spoken since the last Christmas gift was returned unopened. The sermon climatically ends with Paul's triumphant claim that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and the couple whose son is still hospitalized after his last suicide attempt laments, "Jimmy has gone to a place where love cannot seem to reach him. What will happen if, God forbid, he succeeds one day?"

The astute preacher recognizes the way forgiveness hovers on the margins of many a worship service. He knows that somewhere in the congregation is at least one marriage reeling from a betrayal, one college kid who hasn't told her parents she's used their money for something other than tuition and books, and one family holding secrets they cannot imagine revealing. The wise preacher also recognizes situations needing forgiveness are not limited to familial or interpersonal ones. She knows forgiveness would never be far from the thoughts of a congregation situated in Ferguson, Missouri, in the church that nurtured the faith of Kayla Mueller, or a community who had welcomed home a double amputee after the Boston Marathon bombings. In a world awash in violence, where justice and peace may be terms flowing off the preacher's tongue but rarely come to fruition, the question of how to manifest forgiveness is bound up within every weekly witness. The need of and desire for forgiveness is present in the ruptured lives of the gathered community. The challenge becomes how the preacher can answer authentically the weight of the world's ruptures with the mighty Gospel claim that God forgives and we are called to the same.

One of the first biblical references to forgiveness comes in Exodus 34, as Moses intercedes before God on behalf of the errant Israelites who have grown impatient with waiting for Moses' return and fashioned the golden calf. God's first response is anger. "The day will come when I will punish them for their sins," says God. "If I were to come among you I would consume you" (Exodus 32:34, 33:5). But after

a cooling down period, God self-discloses a desire to restore relationships. “I am merciful and gracious,” God declares, “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Moses prays for pardon, consequences are dealt, and the covenant is renewed. Although honest about the human tendency towards sin, the occasion becomes a moment to grasp God’s inclination towards reconciliation. In a situation with tremendous potential for destruction, God moves to demonstrate how it is in God’s nature to forgive.

The divine disclosure uses two key traits to explain God’s forgiving nature. Both will reoccur throughout Israel’s unfolding relationship with their God. The first term is *merciful*. God is merciful or compassionate, or, in Hebrew, *raham*. *Rahum* shares an association with the noun *womb*, indicating God’s mercy contains the embodied compassion of a parent to a child.¹ The second term is *steadfast love* or *loving kindness*. Translated from the Hebrew *hesed*, this describes the covenantal love kindled by God towards God’s people.² The unique term names the fierce loyalty of God, which is a fidelity born of God’s enduring inclination to love. Both terms situate forgiveness squarely with relationship. Mercy and steadfast love, compassion and loving-kindness arise as God considers the creatures God has made. God acts with these characteristics to forgive Israel for its lack of loyalty and thereby enables the relationship to continue. In fact, God’s forgiveness renews and deepens the relationship. First, forgiveness demands Israel’s honest confession of its failures. Then, by offering mercy and love rather than condemnation and banishment, God’s forgiveness affirms a love strong enough to repair the breach.

For some members of the preacher’s congregation, the mercy and loving-kindness of God is as real as their daily bread. These are the saints for whom each sinful lapse is an occasion to experience God’s forgiveness more deeply. For other members of the congregation, this gracious God is a distant memory or a faint hope. They may glimpse God’s slowness to anger or covenantal desire, but it is not a sustained presence making a real difference in their lives. And there will be members who know nothing of the mercy of God or God’s unwavering fidelity. Addressing all three groups, the preacher offers a steady diet of God’s steadfast love.

The preacher introduces or re-acquaints the congregation to a God who has never stopped being in relationship with them. Since forgiveness happens within relationship, the preacher begins with the listeners’ connection to God, unpacking the dimensions of divine care and attention. We can only comprehend our need for forgiveness and God’s forgiving nature towards us to the extent we perceive ourselves accounted for by and accountable to God. Experiencing God’s steadfast love to us, we are stirred to imagine what it might look like to love God in return. Hence the young man who sensed God was leading him to forgive his grandparents did not need to hear a forgiveness-focused sermon to be prompted to ponder reconciliation. Instead, if the sermons over time consistently presented God’s indestructible love for him, then he would naturally long to enact that same mercy and loving-kindness with others, even with those who were, paradoxically, the source of his deepest pain.

Not all preaching about forgiveness happens indirectly. There are occasions demanding a forthright examination of human failings and the need for divine intervention. Just as God’s compassion enters after the people’s rebellious deeds are brought fully before God, forgiveness flowers as sin is described in its insidious dimensions and recognized for its long-lasting effects. An appropriate day for such a sermon is Ash

Wednesday, when many congregations read together Psalm 51. The psalmist prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity; and cleanse me from my sin." With such a searching text, the preacher has the opportunity to foster an honest accounting of sin. What sin requires such cleaning? How is it that God blots out transgressions? What happens when God's steadfast love and mercy enter again? The day's challenge arises in balancing the accounting of sin with the declaration of forgiveness. Most of us can more easily list our sins than live a reconciled, healed life. Although perhaps tempting to remain among the sinner's crushed bones, the preacher's role is to illuminate a contrite, cleansed heart.

The sin the psalmist speaks of is serious. Her entire being needs to be washed. The sin is constantly before him, never far from his thoughts. Whatever the error, it reveals the essential fissure within every human, a propensity to choose wrongly that is so deeply ingrained in one's being that its presence is perceived from one's earliest development. The psalmist further understands that the sin affects God, because the wounds of earth reach heaven. And so the psalmist speaks truth: I am a broken one before God.

The depth of the language as well as the intensity of the remorse challenge a congregation to reflect upon the sins they have committed that have altered a life, rippled into a community, and harmed God's creation. This psalm implores listeners to think seriously about sin. The preacher may acknowledge how easily we dismiss our sins, saying, "It wasn't that bad," "I didn't really hurt anyone," or "Let me tell you how much life has wounded me." And then the preacher speaks the truth rendered by stories of the estranged sister, the betrayed spouse, the rejected grandson, the unjustly imprisoned, or the bombing survivor. Everyone is implicated in sin. "My father was an alcoholic," says the woman you visit in the treatment center. "I swore drink would never have any hold over me. Yet here I am. My children say they understand. They remind me it is a disease. But I see the fear in their eyes, their dashed hopes as they look at me." "I wanted every success," shares the man at the sanctuary door. "I vowed to win at any cost, and I did. Yesterday I passed the home of my last competitor and saw the foreclosure sign in his front yard. My heart felt guilty." "Our church should watch 'Twelve Years a Slave' together," announces the head of the church's social action committee. "I know we're a predominantly white congregation. But to choose not to see it is an exercise of white privilege. We need to remember the evils of slavery." The privilege of preaching on a text like Psalm 51 is the opportunity to bring sin's gravity into a sacred conversation with those who know, deep down, they have sinned. The preacher puts voice to "the truth of the inward being, the wisdom that comes from the secrets of the heart."

But Psalm 51 does not end simply with confession. The writer expresses hope in God's ability to wash away iniquity and blot out wrongdoing. This divine action is harder to describe, for God's interceding is something we cannot predict or control. For the preacher it may have to be enough to profess with confidence God does forgive. God's steadfast love and abundant mercy, in moments of honest confession, moves in again. "I'm not really sure why I want to forgive them," says the young man about to return home to his grandparents, "except that I do. I want to remember the times I felt love from them and loved them in return. I want to see if that shared love can change the future."

Ash Wednesday focuses upon the consequences of sin and the hope of God's cleansing intervention. The scripture lessons used in other seasons offer additional reflections upon God's forgiveness and add to the equation an expectation that Jesus' followers will forgive those who sin against them. Matthew 18:21-35 comes up in the lectionary cycle of scripture readings in mid-September. The programmatic ministries of the fall have begun, the thinner summer crowds have given way to a bustling sanctuary, and the preacher has begun preparing for stewardship season. It is a busy, hopeful time of year, and right in the middle of it, Peter asks Jesus how many times followers are to forgive a recalcitrant sinner. Isn't seven times enough? Jesus' extravagant response seventy-seven or seventy times seven shatters any notion of calculating forgiveness. Jesus punctuates their exchange with the parable of the unforgiving servant. A servant owing an astronomical sum to the king pleads for patience and unexpectedly is released from the entire debt. The freed servant goes out from the king and quickly demands payment from a fellow servant who owes a far lesser sum. Condemned for not showing mercy, the servant's fate illustrates a judgment upon those who do not forgive.

Whenever I've preached this text as a call to forgive as abundantly as God forgives, someone inevitably approaches me to protest. "I've been jerked around by my brother for years. He asks for money, and I loan it to him. He never thanks me or uses the money wisely. Forget about him ever paying me back. Why should I excuse such bad behavior? Isn't there a time when you declare you've done enough?" Or someone shares, "I had a business partner I trusted. We built our client base together. One day I learned she had been scheming to go off on her own for months. She took more than half our clients. My business will never recover. She will never apologize. If I forgive her, won't I make myself vulnerable to more harm?" When I receive such reactions to preaching forgiveness, I respond first by suggesting I didn't do an adequate job proclaiming the gospel. If you heard forgiveness framed as pardon without judgment or reconciliation without truth telling, then you heard a shadow version of forgiveness that changes nothing. At the same time, I continue, if this parable offends your sensibilities and makes you anxious that sometimes some people receive unmerited mercy, then you also heard the message correctly. Forgiveness comes to us as an unexpected, outrageous gift. It releases us to act in the same outrageous manner.

When releasing the servant from his obligation, the king does not pretend the servant owes him nothing. In asking for more time to fulfill his payment, the servant acknowledges his debt. Both recognize their relationship stands in need of a re-accounting. With a vast amount owed by the servant, the realignment requires the king's compassion. The same principles of restoration are available within any fractured relationship. Forgiveness does not pretend a wrong has not happened or a debt has not been incurred. The rupture in the relationship well may be acknowledged as enormous in intensity, intent, or consequence. A restoration in relationship appears impossible without the extension of mercy. While it cannot change the past, forgiveness can transform the future. By "reckoning truthfully with what is wrong," forgiveness manifests as "a way of remembering, in which the past wrong is not denied but deprived of its power to shape the future."³ A new way of remembering relinquishes the sting of the injury or the bitterness of the injustice in favor of a trust in the power of steadfast love. Within Matthew's parable, though, the servant is caught in past structures of relationship. Released from his debt and given back his life, the

servant's first act is to force collection on another's debts. He has not changed. The mercy offered to him has not freed forgiveness to be at work through him.

While forgiveness does not shy away from truth or soften the need for a relational recalibration, forgiveness persists as an outrageous act. It possesses an extravagant quality. It has its unseemly side. Forgiveness is risky. Jesus refused to set a limit on pardons. Jesus taught disciples to pray for their own forgiveness while affirming they would forgive others. The servant's debt to the king was unfathomable. It was erased with the sweep of a hand and the pronouncement of pardon. To offer steadfast love and heartfelt compassion when anger is understandable and punishment is justified defies both logic and emotion. Forgiveness stretches both heart and head. This outrageous risk is displayed most clearly on the cross. Here Jesus holds the weight of the world's violent choices, feels the sting of its refusal to love, and recognizes that those who kill him cannot grasp the enormity of their actions. And the words he speaks are "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Here, in his suffering death, the pathway appears for human acts of forgiveness.

Rowan Williams writes, "The good news of Christianity is that, since God suffers human pain, ...there is beyond all our sin a love that is inexhaustible."⁴ Holding on to this "love that cannot be killed by pain," followers of Jesus discover God's forgiveness of them and uncover their capacity to forgive others.⁵ Anyone striving to relinquish a past pain or reconcile a terrible injustice reaches for this indestructible love, revealed as the power to resurrect life. The true foundation of forgiveness eludes the servant, but it remains available to anyone who dares imagine a healed relationship or redeemed world. A young man seeks to forgive those who harmed him greatly and refuse to see the depth of their damage. His willingness to pardon is outrageous. His decision holds tremendous risk. Forgiveness cannot erase his past. But perhaps he senses it is the proper way to a new future, a resurrected life. As Williams proclaims, "We who profess belief in the forgiveness of sins must see forgiveness as something creative of the future, the future of our own love. It is never a possession, it is not something finished; it is a gift and a hope, and also a call."⁶ Preaching forgiveness invites others into that call, ushering them into the unpredictable, outrageous love of God and inviting them to imagine a forgiven future.

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:946.

2 Brueggemann.

3 Haddon Willmer, "Forgiveness" in *The Oxford Companion of Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (Oxford, Oxford University, 2000), 245.

4 Rowan Williams, "The Forgiveness of Sins" in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995), 51.

5 Williams, 52.

6 Williams, 53.