

Whenever there is a high-profile forgiveness in the news,
a number of people always object.

When Pope John Paul II met with his would-be assassin and forgave him,
some people were offended.

When an Amish community forgave the man who shot ten schoolgirls,
killing five and then himself, and even took up a collection for the man’s
widow and three children, people were mystified.

When congregants and leaders at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston
forgave the shooter who took the lives of nine of their beloved during bible study,
and said that was what their Lord taught, some thought they were nuts.
We don’t always want to hear that the unforgivable have been forgiven.

I used to do a monthly healing service geared to people living in local shelters.
There was a group of guys who hung out on the sidewalk outside the chapel,
drinking and cussing and telling stories. We always invited them, but they
never would come in. We started bringing them lunch, and praying with them,
and eventually, one Father’s Day, a few of them agreed to come to the service.
I told the story of the Prodigal Son, and the amazing mercy and love the father
showed toward his younger son who had taken his inheritance early and
squandered it, and when he was down and out returned home,
hoping to be taken in as a servant since he had forfeited his rights as a son.
And before he even got there, the father ran out to meet him,
kissed and embraced him, restored him to full status in the household,
commanded a feast and party be given to celebrate the return of what was lost.
It’s a wonderful story of grace and forgiveness –
but one of the guys at the service was not having any of it.
Like the older brother in the story, he was outraged that the father would forgive.
I don’t know this guy, but from the looks of him, I imagine he’d done some things,
hurt a few people in his life... but he did not want to hear about forgiveness.

We don’t always want to hear that the unforgivable have been forgiven.
But there can be no real peace without forgiveness.
And there can be no real forgiveness without love.
And love is God’s greatest gift to us.

In our gospel today, we heard John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse in the bible. Many can recite it from memory? For God so loved the world ... It is theologically rich and dense – encapsulating the Cross, the sacrifice, and the idea that some may perish... there is more to unpack than we can do today. But at its heart, this verse it speaks of a love that cannot rest while estranged from its beloved. It speaks of God whose love generated universes and every thing and creature in them, and created humankind in God's image, the image of love; created us with love and for love.

There are some who define sin as “disordered” love, love turned inward upon itself, squirrely, gnarly, twisted.

Forgiveness restores love to its straight and perfect form.

Forgiveness releases the person who has committed harm, and releases the person who does the forgiving.

So why is it so hard? Why don't we do it more easily or more often?

It is costly.. Forgiveness is giving for. Someone has taken something from you;

Instead of demanding it back, you forgive the debt. Now they no longer owe you. So you've lost twice... first the thing taken, and then the hope of restoration.

Forgiveness means a loss of control.

Before we forgive, we are in total control of a situation.

We're righteously aggrieved, and we have the power to keep bound or set free.

The offenders, if they wish to be forgiven, are at our mercy.

But the moment we forgive, we give that power away, in a sense.

We no longer hold anything over them. They're free – and so are we.

Think of what we are saying when we say that God forgives us:

God no longer holds anything over us. There is now no condemnation.

Forgiving us was costly beyond measure; Jesus paid every debt we owe God.

For the whole world. This is how Paul saw it:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved....

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

How exactly did God give his Son? By giving him over into human life, human vulnerability, human beings – who put him to death because he so threatened their order of things. Jesus knew the cross was coming.

And he connected it to an old story from Israel's past when he talked about the Son of Man being raised up "like a serpent in the wilderness." Remember all that Exodus story, Israelites enslaved in Egypt, Moses leading them through the Red Sea... and then they made a wrong turn and a two-week journey took forty years of wandering in the wilderness? The people of Israel, liberated from slavery in Egypt, did nothing but whine – "Why didn't you just leave us slaves? At least we had better food..." God was fed up. "I'll give you something to whine about"! God sends a plague of poisonous snakes – or that's how the story gets passed on. Any misfortune that happened was later interpreted as a cautionary tale. But then God sends a remedy – make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole. This is where we get the symbol for medicine, with the snakes entwined on a staff. The Idea is that by looking at something that kills you can be healed...

Jesus takes this odd idea and image to convey his own mission. We are invited to gaze upon the image of the crucified Christ, and see someone dying from the weight of all the sin in the world, all the exploitation and cruelty and neglect of our fellow human beings and creatures we share this planet with, ... someone God-forsaken, so that we would never have to be. How on earth does gazing at the consequence of our sin save us?

We gaze upon this crucified Christ and see not the horror but the love. Not the human need for power and cruelty that put him there, but the immense love that allowed him to suffer this way, so we would never have to. The Cross reminds us that we are off the hook, because Jesus took the hook for us. *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

And what happens next? We are released into love. God so loved the world. That also means God so loved us. We are made, and reborn into love to walk in the mission of God in the specific ways God has designed for us. Phase Two of "God so loved the world" is "We so love the world." That's the heart of our call to be peacemakers, to try to heal divisions. But there can be no real peace without forgiveness. And there can be no real forgiveness without love.

Love means yielding control – we put ourselves at the mercy of another.

Love is costly. When we love, we risk having our hearts broken.

In fact, maybe we ensure our hearts will be broken. For love carries with it the risk of loss, the guarantee of loss, because our beloved never stays exactly the same.

Forgiveness is love in action.

Forgiveness is a constant exercising of the muscles of love that God gave us.

Forgiveness does more than clear the air – it clears out space in us for more love.

And in that space, God can dwell, making peace through us.

Loving the world through us.

Loving us. SO loving us.

Amen.

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The Gospel

John 3:14-21

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."