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“Forgiveness, Part 2: Doggy Vomit”

Proverbs 24: 28-29, 26:11, Colossians 3:12-15

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Forgiveness includes setting appropriate boundaries, then accepting the risk inherent with relationships. This sermon describes some rituals that enact forgiveness, including the Lord’s Prayer.

When you forgive, you set someone free; then you discover that someone is you. When someone does you wrong, they hand you a big, heavy box. There’s a wound inside the box. Revenge gives the box back to them with a severed head inside, because revenge always escalates. To forgive is taking the box they’ve handed you and sending it away. You decide not to keep that thing because it’s heavy and it has sharp edges and you’d like to have your hands freed up to do more than carry a heavy box with a wound inside. Life is challenging, and faith is hard and the path is narrow. You need all the energy and focus and wisdom available to live life well; you don’t need to be investing those resources towards carrying a heavy box of how you’ve been wounded. So forgive. I know, you forgive *them*, but forgiveness sets *you* free.

When you forgive, it doesn’t depend on what they do. If your forgiving someone is based on them apologizing, appreciating your mercy and thanking you for it, that isn’t going to happen. Not always. To forgive them is to stop giving them free rent inside your head. If you are waiting for someone to do something so you can forgive them, you are allowing their actions to control your joy. Forgiveness frees you from the other person’s power to control your joy.

Picture you and the other person and the thing they did all floating on a river. The river’s current flows at thousands of gallons a day and holds everything up. Not just the good swimmers or the ones who remembered to wear life vests; everything. Forgiveness takes a knife and cuts the rope that ties you to the thing they did, so that it floats away from you. Everything is still held up by the current of the river. But you’re not responsible for determining what floats and what sinks. And you are no longer tied to that thing.

But how do you forgive? In a healthy relationship, you hurt someone, sometimes they hurt you, and you deal with it openly and honestly. You work through it and move one together. But how do you forgive when there’s someone toxic in the scene? Some people are dangerous. They will hurt you and when you forgive them,

they will hurt you again and again. Because that's what they do.

I'm going to repeat the scripture from Proverbs that Andy read earlier. Warning: it was the Holy Bible, but it wasn't pretty. You may want to distract yourself some way. (Come on, you do it regularly when I'm preaching.) Here it comes: Proverbs 26:11— "As a dog returns to its vomit, so do fools repeat their folly."

In the Bible, a "fool" is not a dufus, a clown, who messes up so much that it's funny in a sad way. A fool isn't Phil Dunfy or the Three Stooges. In the Bible, a "fool" is someone who lives by the wrong values. It's Walter White, the central character in "Breaking Bad". In the beginning of the series, he's a high school teacher trying to finance his cancer treatment and take care of his family. But he becomes ruthless, a killer, someone who betrays everyone who gets in his way. He's dangerous, a villain; according to the Book of Proverbs, he's a fool.

"As a dog returns to..." People return to their values, to patterns of behavior, again and again. Proverbs tells you that it's healthy to recognize when a person is dangerous. They will return to their vomit again and again, but you don't have to be there when they do. Some people, if you let them, will hurt you again and again. You have to keep certain people at a distance.

Forgiveness often includes boundaries. You and a partner have started a business together. It's gone well for the first year, then the profits vanish. You discover that your partner has been taking a good portion of the money. They're stealing from you. What do you do? Aren't you supposed to forgive?

Jesus taught that you are to love your neighbor (or your partner) as yourself. That includes loving yourself. Love means forgiving your partner...and protecting yourself. Maybe the business shuts down and it's over. But your partner is so gifted at development and sales and promotion. Could forgiveness include continuing the partnership, but from now on a bookkeeper handles all of the finances? Sometimes forgiveness requires boundaries.

How much of your anger at someone is anger at yourself for not protecting yourself? You said you'd help for two hours and ended up staying five. You said "yes" when you didn't have another yes in you. You need to ask, "What is it that sucks me into that?" Forgiveness includes boundaries. Any healthy relationship includes boundaries.

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me," someone asked Jesus. (Luke 12:13) Jesus, the source of unconditional grace, replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge between you?" Jesus is setting boundaries. "I'm not going to get involved with that." You can forgive and love and yet hold very clear boundaries about what you will participate in and what you won't.

Forgiveness includes setting boundaries and protecting yourself. At the same time, forgiveness always includes risk. Love is risky. You opened up, left

yourself vulnerable, took a risk, and got hurt. To forgive is to expose yourself to being hurt again. But to not risk is to build huge protective walls around you, and it grows very lonely inside those walls. Would you really choose to live in solitary confinement?

Sometimes you forgive someone, then the hurt comes bubbling up all over again. Her child was killed by a drunk driver and she was devastated. But she came to the point of realizing that somehow she had to get beyond it or it would kill her as well. So she forgave the driver, at least as best she could. On the child's first birthday after the accident, the pain of her loss came flooding back. So she forgave the driver, whispering in prayer the words, "I forgive you." The spring her child would have graduated, she repeated the prayer. "I forgive you." "You must forgive seventy times seven", said Jesus. Sometimes you forgive seventy times seven for the same wrong, as you get in touch with new ways you experience the hurt. It's like erasing writing from a blackboard. (Remember those?) One swipe doesn't make it disappear, but with each swipe the sharpness is blurred and the marks a little less distinct.

"You want to forgive, but it just isn't happening for you? Try creating a ritual. Those of you at the Ash Wednesday Services experienced the power of writing the hurt on a coffee filter and watched that hurt wash away in the waters of baptism."

Pause for Jody and Jennie to demo.

"You don't need a licensed minister for that; you can indeed try this at home. You don't even need to be elaborate. Try writing it down and shredding it." [Pause for Andy who will efficiently walk over with a shredder, plug it in, to hold up a piece of paper that says "HURT!" and shred it. He'll then unplug it and store it back under the piano.]

Writing it down requires you to name it, so that it becomes specific and particular, not some amorphous cloud or indefinable group named "they."

Here's a practice that requires no props or open flame: try the Lord's Prayer. Pray it slowly and aloud as an act of forgiveness.

"Our Father who art in heaven.... "Father" and "heaven" convey that God is the source of life and that source is loving. When your life turns toward a Father in heaven, you affirm, "In the midst of my hurts and all that has been done to me, please remind me that life is a gift. With every breath remind me that every breath is a gift from You. And you are good."

"Thy kingdom come..." Praying these words, you're affirming that we live in a dynamic world. The past describes the past, but it does not determine the future. God shapes your future and God has a way of changing things. It isn't about them changing, it's about you become a new kind of person. It isn't easy, but you're asking God to make the difference, to make tomorrow different, to make you new.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Think of forgiveness in terms of time. Not forgiving someone keeps you stuck in the past and in what they did back then. Forgiving them gets you into today. Asking for our daily bread asks God for what we need today. Nothing robs us of joy more than being stuck in the past or anxious about

what may happen in the future. You're not asking for a supply of bread for the next thirty days. You're wanting to find the joy today that comes from living with God today.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Forgiveness is like a snorkel. Wearing a snorkel, you dive underwater. When you re-surface, the first thing you do is blow all the water out of the tube so you can breathe again. A snorkel is not only how you receive air, it's how you breathe out. When you don't extend love and forgiveness to others, it blocks the loving flow to you. God doesn't keep score, so that you get forgiven exactly as much as you forgive others, but not one ounce more. Forgiveness is a flow. You have to receive so that you can give; you have to give so you can receive. That which flows in you also flows through you.

Forgiveness reclaims your power. It refuses to give people inappropriate power over your life. To not forgive uses up great portions of your power just to carry the burden of hurt. You have enough to do, plenty of opportunity to live out your purpose. You need all the power available to live your life fully, the way God designed you. Do that, and you will share "the kingdom, the power, and the glory," with God. Forever. Amen.

Let's pray these words together, slowly and thoughtfully.

* Rob Bell's podcast, <https://robbell.com/portfolio/robcast/>, episodes 38-41 provided much of the material for this sermon.