

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

“...I will forgive their iniquity”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

God makes covenants with God’s people.

The first covenant was between God and Abraham. God asked Abraham to do certain things, in return for which God would make Abraham the father of the Hebrew people. To mark this covenant Jewish men were to be circumcised to symbolize their promise to and with God.

God also made a covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai.

Sinai was the sacred mountain where Yahweh was believed to dwell. Because the Israelites associated God with their rescue from slavery in Egypt, it was natural that they would travel to Sinai before going on to the Promised Land of Canaan. At Sinai the Hebrew people received the Law and their covenant with God was ratified.

Today, in Jeremiah 31 we hear about a new covenant that God is making with God’s people....but this covenant sounds different.

*31:31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new
covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

*31:32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took
them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they
broke, though I was their husband....*

*31:33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel...
says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*31:34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the
LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,
for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Jeremiah 31:31-34

This covenant is different... This time the law is not written on tablets, this time the promises are not given to Abraham or Moses to relate to the others. This time the covenant is given directly to all God's people, and it is for all time, for you and for me, and it is written inside us: written on our hearts. This is different. This covenant is not just for some of God's people or given to a leader to convey to God's people THIS covenant is written on all of our hearts. Because it is written on our hearts, this covenant includes women. The symbol of this covenant is not circumcision, the symbol is universal.

This covenant is different and meant for everyone.

God says,

*I will be their God and they shall be my people.
They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*

This covenant is egalitarian—all shall know God from the least important to the greatest among us. This covenant is different and meant for everyone.

This covenant IS different, but it is not the egalitarian nature of this covenant that is most startling, nor that it is written on our hearts. What is most startling, at least to me, about this covenant is what God promises this time. Listen, God says...

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

In this covenant, this egalitarian, all-are-included covenant God is promising to forgive God's people.

God has made promises to God's people before.

God has made covenants with God's people before.

But this is something new. God is promising forgiveness.

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

God is promising forgiveness even while acknowledging that God's people have been sinful and have broken their former covenant. God is promising forgiveness although God recognizes that God's people have been disloyal and disobedient. Despite these transgressions, God says, I will forgive my people and remember their sin no more.

Forgiveness.

It is an important issue to God, an important issue to the Israelites, and an important issue in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Today's reading from the Book of Jeremiah is a testament to the importance of forgiveness—for God's is making a new covenant with God's people, writing it on our hearts, and the new covenant promises forgiveness.

And, when we move from the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures into the New Testament, we find that Jesus continues to lift up the importance of forgiveness—he speaks about it over and over again throughout his ministry. And, at the end of his life, at a poignant and deeply moving moment when Jesus is sharing the Last Supper with his disciples, he takes the cup and says these tender words,

*Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

Matthew 26:27-28

On Jesus' last night on earth, at his last meal, he speaks about forgiveness.

And, when crucified, with his last breath while on the cross, Jesus says these poignant words,

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

Luke 23:34

And so today we pause to notice that at some of the most dramatic, most moving moments in the Old and New Testaments, at some of the most significant moments in the life of the Israelites and in Jesus' life as well, the words that are spoken are words about forgiveness.

Acknowledging the importance of forgiveness in the Bible, and recognizing the importance of forgiveness in our own lives, let us reflect on the meaning of, the work of, and the process of forgiveness.

Every single Sunday in this church we say the Lord's Prayer together. Every single Sunday we say, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Has that prayer become rote?

Are we each week sincerely asking for forgiveness? Are we truly forgiving those who trespass against us?

Forgiveness is an important, difficult, multi-layered issue for Christians.

We know it is an important issue to us. We think we are called to forgive easily and readily, but we don't understand that it is actually a complicated issue.

We have latched on to that well worn saying, "Forgive and forget" and think that somehow that is the Christian thing to do.

We fail to recognize that the well worn saying “Forgive and forget” has no basis in the reality of the convoluted emotional and intellectual network that is our mind and heart.

Minds and hearts don’t forgive and forget very easily so holding that tired slogan up as the standard bearer for our responses as Christians is setting ourselves up for failure. Minds and hearts remember—joys and triumphs, AND rejections and wounds. And so “forgive and forget” is unrealistic, we need an alternative. And the alternative is not to remember and begrudge, the alternative is to remember and forgive again. We inevitably remember. And yet when the painful memory washes over us, takes our breath away and takes us to our knees, we forgive again.

In the Book of Matthew, Peter comes to Jesus and says,
*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?
As many as seven times?*
Jesus answers this way,
Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times.
Matthew 18:21-22

That passage is often interpreted that Peter will be hurt many times by many people and he will be called to forgive over and over again. However, I believe Jesus is also suggesting that Peter may be hurt badly once, but wounds repeat on us like food that won’t digest, and we are called to forgive the same person over and over and over again. We remember and forgive—again and again. Jesus seems to recognize that.

It has been said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.” If we nurse our wounds and keep them fresh and alive, we are living inside a prison of our own creation. However, our brains are not like computers. We cannot feel an old wound, hit the delete button and have it disappear. But we can set that prisoner free over and over again by forgiving over and over again. “Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times.”

Elder-prophet-pastor Mary Cosby, who co-founded Washington DC’s Church of the Savior in 1947 (she is now 86) was interviewed recently in Sojourners magazine. Pastor Cosby was asked if forgiveness has gotten any easier for her as she has aged. She responded, “Learning how to forgive should get easier the older you get, and I think it does. The older I get the more important it is to do things as an act of the will and let the feelings come later. Forgiveness is something that takes time for most people. They can make the first acts immediately, but to really

internalize forgiveness takes time. The first act is just the will—just to say “I forgive.” I don’t feel it, but I am committed to it.”

An act of will...a commitment.... and an awareness that the process will take time.

In his book, Forgiveness is a Choice, Robert Enright outlines four steps in the process of forgiveness: uncovering our anger, deciding to forgive, working on forgiveness, and discovering release from our emotional pain. These steps are like the ones discussed in the recent workshop on forgiveness led by Pastor Matilda.

In my experience with years of pastoral care, I believe the Church has failed to help people identify, understand and work through step one: uncovering our anger. In fact, I believe the message from the Church has been that we should cover, sublimate, mask, and deny our anger. Isn’t that what we have learned in Church through both subtle and overt messages? But like a toxic waste buried in a distant field, anger leaks out over time—it bubbles up to the surface unexpectedly, surprises us by its long shelf-life, and distorts and harms interactions and relationships long into the future.

Writing in Sojourners magazine, Rose Marie Berger says “Uncovering our anger means dealing head on with the ways we usually hide it. These include: **denial** (“what happened wasn’t that bad”), **suppression** (“I can’t think about that right now”), **repression** (“I just don’t remember what happened”), **displacement** (“I can’t be mad at him, so I’ll be mad at you instead”), **regression** (“I am 35, but I’ll throw a tantrum like a 2-year old”), or **identification with the offender** (“I won’t be hurt like that again, so I’ll just act like she did”).

But when we are able to stare directly at our anger, admit it, name it, own it and study its component parts, we are able to access fresh spiritual energy. The energy we previously invested in denial, suppression, repression and regression is freed up. We can then feel a sense of humility that allows us to ask for forgiveness from those we have injured and enables us to feel a clean, pure flame of righteous anger that fuels creative, passionate change.

And then the cycle of forgiveness starts over again...“not seven times,” said Jesus, but “seventy-seven.”

From her vantage point as an 86 year-old elder-prophet-pastor, Mary Cosby says, “Forgiveness is probably the basic thing that Christians need to learn.” She says we need to “train our forgiveness muscle.”

The Apostle's Creed, which some of us had to memorize to be confirmed in the Church, ends with these five lines,

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.*

“Perhaps forgiveness is the last thing mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed,” writes Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, “because it is the last thing learned in life. Perhaps none of us can understand the forgiveness of God until we ourselves have learned to forgive.”

“...until we ourselves have learned to forgive.”

It IS something we learn. And practice.

Something we work at, and achieve—over time.

“Forgive and forget” is an unhelpful, worn expression that diminishes our feelings and denies our true intellectual and emotional process.

Forgive and remember and forgive again is a more accurate reflection of how we are made and what we are striving to achieve.

Enright’s four steps in the process of forgiveness—uncovering our anger, deciding to forgive, working on forgiveness, and discovering release from our emotional pain—is a discipline that Christians can learn and practice. Then our own family relations, our church interactions, our whole lives will experience an honesty, clarity and freedom not previously known.

Forgiveness.

It was important to the Israelites, it is important in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was important to Jesus, it is important in the New Testament, and it is important to God. We can learn the process, we can be thoughtful and disciplined, conscious and direct. We can do this.

As we take this process to God in prayer and work through the steps we know bring new life, we will experience the truth of this lovely expression taught to me by our own Trish LaFreniere:

“Forgiveness is the fragrance of the violet on the heel of the one who crushed it.”
Amen.