

Matthew 18: 20-35: John 20: 19-23

Things That Will Endure: Forgiveness

The Apostle Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians 15 where he gives his most extensive teaching on the resurrection writes “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58). This verse is an indication that there are things that we do now that will have lasting effect into the New Creation. The obvious question would be what does Paul mean by labouring in the Lord. Paul later writes in Philippians, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:12-13). With that in mind, these labours are things that result from God’s own work in us, things which he enables us to desire and work for. If I were to create a list of what these labours might be I would include forgiveness, justice, worship, acts of love, evangelism, and beauty. The next few weeks we’ll be delving into this list and today we’ll start with forgiveness.

Forgiveness, forgive, and forgiven are words we hear quite frequently around the church. Yet, with such frequency of use I often wonder if we really know what the words mean. It’s like in the movie *The Princess Bride*, Vizzini the Sicilian pirate keeps using the word “Inconceivable.” So finally, Inigo Montoya, the Spanish swordsman says, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” So, maybe we should play wordsmith’s and define it.

The first place we should look is at our own English definition of it. The word “forgive” is a word that comes to us from the Old English “*forgifan*”. It means to give forth or away from oneself to the utmost. The most generous form of giving therefore would be to free someone from a debt or from the claim you would have on them for a wrong suffered. Our Internet expert at Wikipedia defines forgiveness as the process of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offence, difference or mistake, and/or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution. Forgiveness is a process (not just a onetime act) to conclude the ill within oneself and others that suffering wrong and causing wrong brings about. It’s processing through the relinquishing of a claim upon another person. We can wish a person brought to justice, but as our legal system proves bringing a person to justice does not resolve the ill we harbour.

Now moving away from Old English into the New Testament, we find that the Greek word we translate as forgiveness (verb *aphiemi* and noun *aphiesis*) has a variety of uses beyond what I’ve just defined as forgiveness. It can mean to permit, consent to, allow, or let something happen so that its result may be its judge. Letting something play itself out so that its own consequences are its punishment. This is where the biblical concept of God’s wrath is rooted. In Paul’s thinking God’s wrath is that the consequence of sin is having to live with the consequence of sin, and God who is righteous in the end forgives. Thus, even God’s wrath is rooted in the process of forgiveness. Carrying this one step further, it’s the same word Jesus uses to say if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, *give* him your coat also. That is certainly giving away to the utmost.

The word can also mean toleration. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the farmer tolerates the growth of tares among the wheat until harvest time because weeding out the tares before harvest would destroy the wheat as well. It’s like asking why does God allow bad and evil to continue in among the good? Because if God removed them now from his creation in which good and evil are so tightly enmeshed it would destroy everything even the good before its time, before the ultimate harvest when forgiveness will have ripened.

Another use for the Greek word for forgiving is to leave behind such as when a fever or evil spirit left a person because Jesus healed them. Discipleship involves leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. Yet, the word can mean to desert or forsake someone as when Jesus' disciples deserted him. So the concepts of being utterly healed and discipleship are rooted in the process of forgiveness. Even being utterly forsaken is rooted in the process of forgiveness. Thus, God's healing us and even, God forbid, God's forsaking of us are rooted in the process of God's forgiving us as much as his making us to be Jesus' disciples.

Stepping into the Old Testament, the Hebrew language has a word for forgiving which is used in much the same way as we use the word, but there are other words which we translate with forgiving. Sometimes the verb for carrying something away or bearing the burden of something is used of God's forgiveness of us creating the image of God carrying away our sins or bearing the burden of our sins as the scapegoat did on the day of Atonement and as Jesus did on the cross. There is a verb for the actual act of sacrificing for sin which we translate as forgive. The word for be merciful or gracious to me is another. Asking God to remember our sins no more is asking for forgiveness. Asking God not to collect our sins or even receive our sins as a bad gift. Sometimes God is asked to let go or release us of our sins. Finally, to cover over which means atone for our sins.

So, pulling all this together forgiveness isn't just a one time thing we do where we say "you're forgiven and that's that." It's more like saying, "I forgive you, but it's going to take a while for me to forgive you." When we are in the process of forgiving we are striving to let the claim for justice or retribution go. We leave it behind until it leaves us and deserts us utterly. In the work of forgiveness we have to let consequences play themselves out rather than seek vengeance or restitution for God is using those consequences to work his wrath on the one we are forgiving for God's working of his wrath is God's means to bring the person to forgiveness and healing; i.e., justice. We have to exercise toleration in that for the moment the person who wronged us isn't getting what he deserves or what we think he deserves. Yet, in being tolerant we are exercising faith and letting God work his wiles to bring the person to see their own sinfulness, their brokenness and in turn desire to be healed just as God did with us. Forgiveness in us begins to flower when we find ourselves deeply desiring that God heal and forgive those who have hurt us.

Forgiveness is ultimately freeing a person, releasing our claims for restitution against a person so that God can work on them for healing. Our reading in Matthew indicates that we will suffer if we refuse to forgive when God has so graciously forgiven us. Yet, Jesus takes this a step further in John's Gospel (actually he says something to this effect in all the Gospels) saying that if we forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if we retain the sins of any they are retained. Those sins are held as unforgiven. He is indeed saying here that because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us his church, he has endowed us with the authority to forgive or not to forgive; to set or not to set people free that God may heal them. We, the body of Christ have a unique ability God-breathed into us to work along with God in the lives of others so that people can have a foretaste now of the healing that will be in the New Creation. We are not only those who must forgive but we are also those who must look our friends, family members, neighbours, co-workers square in the eye when they start using grudge talk or judge talk and present forgiveness is the only real answer, explain why, and help them along in the journey. We are also those who have the authority to say to another, you are forgiven; take up your mat and walk. We all know people who are "stuck" because of needing to forgive or to be forgiven. We are those who must listen for the words to tell another that God doesn't count our sins. God doesn't remember them. God does collect them in a box to pull them out against us. He bore them away on the cross. God dealt with sin once and for *all* on the cross. The love in that act and the act itself completely obliterates any misplaced desire we may have to turn God into a grudge holding judge. In the new creation there will be ultimate healing brought about by forgiveness. Truly, the forgiveness we strive for now will endure into that new day. Amen.