

“PERSPECTIVAL FORGIVENESS”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 3, 2016

Text: John 20:19-31

The strangest thing happened to me this week. In the middle of a dream, I said something so awful it woke me up.

The (fictional) action in the dream took place many years ago, when I was a child. In my dream, I told another person in anger “I hate you. I *finally* and *permanently* hate you.”

The other person was a real person, and although in real life I never said anything of the sort to that person, what I said is so *close* to the truth that I couldn’t stay asleep. I had to deal with it. See, I was writing a sermon this week about today’s Gospel. I was focusing in particular on the singular gift Jesus gave to his disciples when he breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Of course, the sermon was being driven by people I have known who have trouble forgiving others. I wanted my sermon to help *all of you* get better at using this tremendous power we have from God, the power to release other people from judgment.

Then I had this dream about the person I know best—myself. And I thought about how Jesus criticized the Pharisees as blind guides, people who wanted to get the speck out of someone else’s eye when they had a log in their own.

How could I say “I finally and permanently hate you!” to anyone?

The shock of the dream helped me see forgiveness from a certain angle, and that is what I want to share with you this morning. It gave me an insight into the nature of forgiveness and its opposite. What I share may not prove helpful to you, but I hope it will help me!

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When I said, in my dream, “I finally and permanently hate you,” I was saying that henceforth I would know that person only according to the decision I made at that point. My decision was to view that person only from the perspective of that person being the one who had transgressed against me in such a way that I was not open to considering whatever they might do from that point on. I was saying that the future did not matter anymore. Nothing would appease me. Nothing else would matter. I had decided. I had done my categorization, and I was satisfied. My decision was final and permanent. The book was closed.

I want to suggest that there is a difference between “technical forgiveness” and “perspectival forgiveness.” Technical forgiveness is easier. You simply pass judgment on someone for something, and then you say “I forgive you,” and you renounce your right to revenge, and move on.

Perspectival forgiveness is different. It has to do with how you *always* look at people. Jesus commands “perspectival forgiveness” when he says “love your enemies.” He means, don’t use what people do to you as a basis for how you treat them. Another way he preached perspectival forgiveness was when he said “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” What I am calling “perspectival forgiveness” is a habit we put on, of thinking about other people and valuing other people *not* according to our judgments about them, *whether or not our judgments are well-informed*. “Perspectival forgiveness” is what is operating in us when we are able to forgive someone seventy times seven times, as Jesus commands. Or when we turn the other cheek. Perspectival forgiveness, in fact, is nothing else but . . . love. Grace. Mercy.

What became very clear to me, as I reflected on Bad Marcus in the dream, was that God requires of us not mere technical forgiveness of people for this or that, but an entirely new perspective which is utterly incapable of making “final and permanent” judgments about other people, since, after all, to judge does not belong to us. To finally and permanently hate anyone, or even to decide once and for all to hold another person or type of person in contempt, is to violate blatantly the second great commandment, which is to love our neighbor as our self. We can talk about peace, joy, faith, hope, and love in pretty vague terms sometimes. But the instrument by which these all come about is a thing called forgiveness. Both technical and perspectival. Luther says, “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” We begin our service with confession and forgiveness because that is the way in to everything else God wants for us. Not occasionally, but as a life plan.

Without the forgiveness of sins; without the power to forgive sins; without people who are filled with a forgiving spirit, it does not matter how many cool ideas people come up with for improving society and making people healthy and safe. Because ideas will never break the logjam of hostility and contempt people have for one another, based on the past. We cannot get to God’s future of peace and well-being without getting over what is past. And we will never get over what is past, without the forgiveness of sins.

Speaking of logjams. Many years ago we took our kids to a state park in Minnesota where we read about a logjam on the St. Croix River. Logs were floated down the river from where they were being cut, and sometimes a logjam would develop where some logs would get caught in a bend in the river. Once the logjam was two miles long. Nothing could move. Finally, 24 lb of dynamite were used to get the logs moving downstream again.

Our lives get jammed up with decisions we make about each other which prevent the future we all want, a future of peace among all. The only dynamite which can break these logjams of judgment is forgiveness, and that means *our* forgiveness.

When an injured Jesus stood in front of his disciples and did not ask them to get justice for him but instead told them to be at peace, that was dynamite. When he breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit, and told them that if they forgave the sins of anyone they were forgiven, that was dynamite.

And when he said that if they retained the sins of any they were retained, he was telling them what happens when there is no dynamite. Stuff gets retained. It stays around. And it kills the world.

He was not giving them permission to visit the iniquities of others upon their heads. He was telling them they were now the proud owners of a concession to take away sins from others, and they had better get busy. Jesus was saying, “I don’t want to hear anybody ever again say ‘I finally and permanently hate you.’” He was saying “unlock this door” and “tear down this wall” and heal the world with my own special brand of healing, bringing life and salvation to all.

You see, the very first post-Easter logjam occurred right there in the room in which the Galilean disciples were gathered, when someone said to someone else: “Lock the door.” He was right. Paul would tell us later that he was breathing threats and murder against anyone who bore the name of Jesus. They were in danger. Which made it a wonderful opportunity for the resurrected Christ to show up and say to them “Peace be with you guys who ran away when I got arrested and are pretending you never were my disciples.” Peace be with you.

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Resurrection is all about new beginnings. But with God, “new beginnings” does not mean we make the same mistakes with different people in a different place. That was what “new beginnings” meant to me when I was growing up. Easter fulfills the promise God made to Noah that in the future “new beginnings” would not mean laying waste to the past, but working with it through the exceptional power of forgiveness, to take the world we have, the people we have, and allow God to fill us all with fresh life. Amen.

