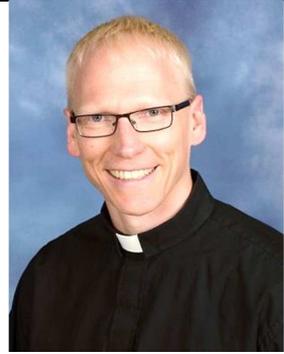


As We Forgive

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we tell God that we "forgive those who sin against us." Do we mean that? This is much easier said than done! Sometimes it can be very challenging to let go of a grudge. We tend to hold on to bitterness, and our hearts can get wrapped up in an offense.



Jesus speaks emphatically about our need to forgive others. "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). These are strong words! Jesus is intertwining our willingness to forgive others with God's willingness to forgive us. Only in forgiving others do we experience God's forgiveness.

Words of confession and forgiveness are some of the most powerful yet difficult words we ever speak. At the beginning of a worship service, we often start with a time of confession. "Almighty God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed." In these or similar words, we apologize for the error of our ways. God knows we have not lived as we should, and our confession is a way of clearing the air and starting fresh in our relationship with God. We do this in human relationships, too. If we exchanged harsh words with a friend the last time we talked, we might start our next interaction with a modest confession. "So...about that last time we talked...sorry about that."

It is humbling to speak those words of apology. Many people are not brave enough to do it. Our pride often gets in the way. We tend to think that the other person should be the one to apologize. But when we set our own ego aside, we can usually see our own fault in the fractured relationship. Apologies take many forms, depending on the situation and the person. "I'm sorry" is a good way of expressing regret. Saying "I was wrong" is taking responsibility for what we did. Other people want us to make restitution and hear us ask, "What can I do to make it right?" Repentance is saying "I'll try not to do that again." And sometimes it's best to be direct and simply ask, "Will you please forgive me?"

We need these words of confession in healthy relationships! We need these words in our relationship with God and with one another. Is there someone in your life to whom you need to apologize? The day I wrote this I gave an apology to someone I hurt the day before. I had been overly critical, which left an icy tension. Once I apologized, the ice thawed, and we both felt much better. I hate to imagine how many more days our own little “polar vortex” would have continued if we hadn’t taken Jesus at his word. The best time to say we’re sorry...is as soon as possible.

Same goes for the words, “I forgive you.” Every single day we have opportunities to forgive others. Much of the time they don’t even know there is an offense. Most of these offenses are small and don’t even warrant an apology. We can forgive even if they haven’t apologized. We might not even need to tell them. To forgive is a choice. The road of forgiveness can be a journey, but the path leads us to freedom.

My family tells a story of my grandfather Jake. At a family reunion, his sister came up to Jake and said, “I just want to let you know, I forgive you.” And Jake said, “For what?” “For that comment you made last year about me gaining weight!” Grandpa Jake was a kind man and had only agreed with something she said about herself. He had no idea he caused offense. But she had festered on this for a year! Refusing to forgive left her in pain. This is why Jesus spoke so strongly about our need to forgive. When we refuse to forgive, the offense continues to hurt us.

We need to forgive others as much as, if not more than, they need to be forgiven. Theologian Lewis Smedes said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” Jesus desperately wants us to be set free from all that weighs us down. When we forgive someone, the claws of the offense come off of us, and we can heal. To forgive is not to say that what happened was okay...it is to say it will no longer actively hurt me and hold me back from my future. Jesus urges us to let go of the grudges we hold. Release the bitterness. Be set free.

In Christ,



“Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”
Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly.
Try seventy times seven.”
(Matthew 18:21-22, MSG)