

Peace Be With You

A sermon on John 20:19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 April 2024

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Message

The forgiveness we experience in the risen Christ is dauntingly radical and we are called to share it.

Sermon

I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know here, but forgiveness is bloody hard work. Some of us are more naturally forgiving than others, but we all have our limits beyond which forgiveness just seems way too much to ask.

From conversations I've had with many of you over the years, and from my own experience, I know that it is not too uncommon to feel so hurt by someone, or so angry with someone, that it feels really difficult to even be in the same room as them.

There are plenty of times when forgiveness doesn't seem that hard for me. I'm pretty thick-skinned, and I quite often have the experience of someone apologising to me for some hurt they think they caused me and I take a while to work out what they are talking about because I hadn't even noticed. But I still know that can't-be-in-the-same-room feeling.

There is a line in our nighttime Compline prayer liturgy where we pray "for those we find hard to forgive or trust", and I have a few people who jump immediately to mind every time we pray that prayer. A couple of them were people who were part of this church in the past and who made big angry denunciations of me on their way out, leaving no opportunity to have their claims questioned or clarified. I haven't seen either of them for many years, but I still see their names bob up from time to time, and there is always a twisting in my gut whenever I hear of them.

Another is a person who was appointed as a mediator for a dispute I was party too, and after failing to declare a prior relationship with the other party that I knew nothing about, proceeded to break all the rules of mediation by taking sides and becoming a prosecutor. I still feel myself ice up whenever we find ourselves in the same room.

There is another person whose offence against me dates back more than thirty years and who I have actually never even met face to face – the offence occurred remotely – so I probably wouldn't even know if I was in the same room, but if I did know, it would probably be very uncomfortable for the both of us.

I'm not at all proud of any of these feelings. I aim to be a thoroughly forgiving person, but my feelings towards these people show that my capacity for forgiveness still falls well short of "thorough".

I know I'm not on my own in that. What I hope has just happened as I have shared those examples of mine is that examples of your own have come to mind for you. Not because I wish them on you, but because I'm sure most of you have them, and because I think an awareness of them is a way in to the nature of the gospel as it comes to us in the resurrection story we heard read a few minutes ago. Hold in mind that feeling, that gut-turning, icing-up, fist-clenching, too-much-to-forgive-this-time feeling.

In one of the Harry Potter movies, there are creatures called dementors, and when they approach, the windows suddenly ice up and all feelings of warmth and affection and happiness feel like they have been sucked from the room. Who are the people who make you feel like that? The people who have maliciously wounded you, who have deserted you or betrayed you or let you down, who have treated you with callous disrespect and destroyed things that were truly precious to you? Who are the ones who you still find it at least awkward, if not nauseating or agonising to find yourself face to face with?

It was just few days after Jesus had been humiliatingly executed, and his ex-followers were in hiding. They were in hiding because they were justifiably afraid that the tsunami of religiously fuelled nationalistic outrage which had made a sacrifice of Jesus would swallow them up too, but they were probably also hiding from themselves, licking their wounds of shame and self-pity after they had promised undying loyalty to Jesus and then given him up in a flash the minute there was real danger at hand. However forgiving Jesus had always seemed to them, they knew that they had gone too far now. If he hadn't been dead, and they'd ever had to face him again, they knew that the windows would ice up.

And suddenly, in this hidey-hole of misery, shame and self-loathing, there is Jesus, standing among them. The fact that it was impossible made it no less excruciatingly awkward. The fact that he was dead only made it all the more terrifying. Here was the dead victim of their failure, come back from the dead to deal with those who had turned their backs on him when he most needed their support.

Now you may be thinking at this point that I got you to hold the wrong images in your heads. Surely, instead of asking you to think of the people who had wronged you, I should have asked you to think of the people you had wronged, the people who would have trouble forgiving you. Surely that would be a better way to get you to imagine your way into the experience of the terrified disciples here.

You're right. It would be, and it is worth doing, but what I'm wanting you to imagine your way into here is the experience of Jesus. Because here he is, faced with exactly the sorts of people we've called to mind who show us the limits of our capacity for forgiveness. But here he is among them, holding out his hands with the flesh still torn and raw from the nails, saying, "Peace be with you".

Think about that, about those words even. Those are the same words we will be exchanging with one another in a few minutes time as we prepare to come together around the Lord's Table. Unfortunately that action is a bit too muted for us now. Alongside some wonderful gains that have come with taking our regular worship online like this, there are undoubtedly some very real losses too, and one of them is being able to physically enact the "passing of the peace". Of course, for some of the more introverted and socially reticent among us, the "passing of the peace" was always the bit of the liturgy we'd have most readily ditched, and I get that, but there is something lost, nevertheless. We've lost the capacity to make it personal within the liturgy.

Some of you have heard me tell the story before of someone who, back then, was iced-up angry with me, and stayed away from church for a couple of months, and then contacted me one Sunday to say, "I'm really missing church, but I'm still angry at you, so I'm coming to

church this evening, but I want you to stay well away from me, especially during the passing of the peace.” I messaged them back saying, “That’s okay, so long as you understand that that means that neither of us can receive the bread and wine in communion tonight. If we can’t genuinely wish each other peace, we are excluding ourselves from the table.”

You see, that’s what these words from Jesus mean when we bring them into the liturgy at this point. These words are an act of forgiveness. The “passing of the peace” was never intended as an opportunity to greet your best friends, but to seek out those with whom you had a problem, and to offer forgiveness and peace. It was not possible, of course, to sort everything out and resolve it in that brief moment in the liturgy, but it was possible to assure one another that that was our hope and our intention.

Although our online liturgies are still very much live, in the moment events, one of the things we have lost by not being physically in the same room, is the ability to have those small one-on-one exchanges within the liturgy. But it is still possible, and I would encourage you to give some attention to this, to use that moment when we say “Peace be with you: and also with you” to call to mind those who you might feel most resistant to saying those words to personally, and to prayerfully take that step of commitment towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

Because that’s what it is about. Whatever hurts and insults and failures have occurred between us, we wish each other peace and wellbeing. Many grievances between us are relatively petty and forgiveness is not unduly challenging. But what if one of those people you were thinking about before were to turn up in the room with you? Could you bring yourself to clasp their hand and say those words? And even if you could, could you bring yourself to really mean it? I’m not at all sure that I could. In fact, in some cases I’m pretty sure I couldn’t. And in order to understand how mind-bogglingly extraordinary the forgiveness that Jesus offered was, that’s where we have to go.

There is no play-acting or pretence about the forgiveness that Jesus offers. One of the common misunderstandings of forgiveness is that “forgive” and “forget” are the same thing; that when you forgive, you pretend as though the offence never happened. Garbage! We don’t have Jesus here hiding his wounds under a new pair of gloves and saying “Look, it was nothing. It doesn’t matter.” The wounds are right out in the open. The gruesome consequences of everyone leaving Jesus to his fate are not hidden or down-played. They are the context and content of the forgiveness.

“Peace be with you,” he says. Faced with those I find hardest to forgive, I’d be thinking, “I hope your heart and mind are racked by guilt that keeps you awake at night for the rest of your life”, but Jesus is wishing them peace of mind. I’d be thinking, “I hope your life is anything but peaceful; I hope that if I don’t get to do it myself, all manner of violent retribution overtakes you and makes you pay tenfold for what you have done”, but Jesus is saying “Peace be with you: peace of mind, peaceful surrounds, peaceful relationships, a life free from trauma and tragedy. Peace be with you.”

This is a forgiveness that doesn’t pretend for a moment that nothing serious ever happened, but that says that even knowing, and doubtless always remembering, what happened, I relinquish any desire to see you made to pay, and I wish you deep and lasting and all-encompassing peace and wellbeing. And if you have managed to hold those people who least

deserve your forgiveness in mind, then I hope you are starting to get some feel for just how much bigger and more amazing that forgiveness is than anything you or I are yet capable of.

The unimaginable, seemingly impossible extent of that forgiveness is the good news of the gospel. It is so difficult for us to comprehend that for 2000 years we have repeatedly kept trying to turn the message back into a normal religion that lays down the rules and guarantees that those who fall foul of them will be made to pay in the end. But this is the message of the gospel: God is always and unchangingly and forever exactly what we have seen in Jesus – outrageously, limitlessly, and gratuitously forgiving, beyond anything we could ever imagine ourselves being able to do.

But just before I finish, let me add something. Just because we can't imagine ourselves ever being that forgiving doesn't mean we won't. This forgiveness is free, but it's not cheap. It is life changing and all-demanding. Forgiveness is not an off-shore account that Jesus lets us make withdrawals from. It is a whole new world that he calls us to live in.

That's why we pray "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We are not capable of accepting much more forgiveness than we give. It's not that Jesus holds it back, it's just that we won't accept what we don't believe in. Our capacities to accept forgiveness and to forgive others grow together as they feed one another.

The experience of being forgiven transforms us into increasingly forgiving people, and also into people who are less prone to repeating things that need forgiveness. That's part of what is so important about the still-wounded hands of the risen crucified one. They are a constant living reminder of why we don't want to fail the same way again, even as they are a reminder of the guilt we have been freed from.

We've still got a long way to go. My inability to yet forgive those people I can so readily call to mind is evidence of how far I have yet got to go in comprehending and accepting the forgiveness that Jesus is offering me. But it also tells me that the one who is capable of forgiving to an extent that I can't even imagine is also capable, by the same life-giving power, of persevering with me until the same miracle of forgiveness grows to fullness in my heart.

So, as we come to the Lord's Table in a few minutes and we exchange the greeting of peace, there is no point in pretending that we are yet capable of living up to the full meaning of the words of peace that we say.

In a way, what we are doing is rehearsing. We are rehearsing the forgiveness of those whose failures left us with the scars we now carry. We are reprogramming our responses to one another to make them more like Jesus. We are rehearsing the words and actions of forgiveness so that they might become true and we might become impossibly forgiving people.

But don't only think of it as that kind of challenge, or it will weigh you down. Experience it first as the receiving of forgiveness. For this is the table of our risen crucified Lord, and he reaches out to you in the wounded hands of everyone you encounter. This is his table, and these hands are all his hands. Receive his forgiveness. Receive his Holy Spirit.

I mentioned the dementors before, and the way their presence makes the windows ice up. The image here of Jesus breathing onto his disciples and saying "Receive the Holy Spirit"

creates in my mind a picture of the ice being melted by the warm breath. Receive Holy Spirit in that warm breath that the icy grip of hostility and resentment and vengefulness might be melted away to leave only the warm fire of forgiveness received from those wounded hands.