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Luke 6:27-36
There is forgiveness.

Elizabeth O'Connor said, "Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be." How true! There are lots of hard teachings from Jesus, but I am not sure it gets much harder than in Luke 6:27-28 when Jesus says – "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." I don't know about you, but I have a hard time even forgiving a stranger in traffic who cuts me off never mind the type of forgiveness Jesus is suggesting. Loving my enemies. Doing good for people who hate me. Blessing people who curse me. Praying for those who abuse me.

This last one at least reminds me of the old Irish Prayer:

"May those who love us, love us;
And for those who don't love us,
May God turn their hearts;
And if He doesn't turn their hearts,
May He turn their ankles,
So we will know them by their limping."

Forgiveness is a hard ask from Jesus for us mortals. Loving, blessing, doing good, praying for enemies is incredibly difficult when our lives have been truly hurt or irreparably damaged by our trespassers. Jesus only has the credibility to make this teaching because we know he had lots of enemies – people who would lie about him, those who would ridicule him, those who would turn their backs on him, those who would abuse him, those who would kill him. Jesus had skin in the game when it came to the need to forgive people. Throughout his life Jesus modeled forgiveness for us, even to the point of forgiving people while he was hanging from the cross. Forgiveness was important to Jesus and so as Christians, like it or not, forgiveness needs to be important to us.

Theologian Miroslav Volf says there are two essential steps in forgiveness. First, to forgive is to condemn the wrongdoing. Then to forgive is to give the gift to the wrongdoer of not counting it against them. He says, "The generous release of a genuine debt is the heart of forgiveness." Presbyterians are big on debts and debtors. Each week we pray to be forgiven from our debts as we forgive our debtors. The knowledge that we need forgiveness makes us more sympathetic to those in need of forgiveness. At least once a week I get a phone call from Utah or Nevada or Texas telling me there is good news, someone somewhere has decided to forgive my students debts. I don't have student debt anymore, so it is not really good of news for me. But the gospel is good news that our real debts are generously forgiven by God.

Forgiveness is part of the life of a Christian. Examples of forgiveness are sprinkled throughout scripture. Sometimes it is God's need to forgive humans and sometimes it is humans needs to forgive each other. The need for forgiveness is as old as the human story. And it runs in two

directions – vertically and horizontally. From God down to us and from us out to others. Our faith tells us that forgiveness runs first from God to the world; and then forgiveness spiders itself outwards, as those who have been forgiven, start to forgive each other. We become this interconnected web of those who have been forgiven and those who have forgiven others. Jesus teaches this and models this because it is not something we would instinctively know how to do or be able to do on our own.

Patrick Johnson, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina, tells a story about how he learned about forgiveness as a kid. When he was a teenager, his family became a foster family. He had two brothers, so when you added in the three dogs it was already a full and active household. When he was thirteen years old, his family began providing foster care for one to three teenage boys. These were often children who were experiencing some level of emotional difficulty and were leaving families who had all but given up on them. The foster boys would move in and usually stay with the Johnson family for a few years. In addition to sharing the house and family life, Patrick and his brothers shared their rooms with these boys sleeping in bunk beds.

Patrick says, “You can imagine the difficulty of trying to knit together three brothers and three foster brothers into one cohesive family. We were always fighting about something, and usually ganging up on each other in groups of two or three. So my parents instituted a nightly practice at dinner to try to bring us together. Every night, after dinner, we would have what my mother called “IPR” time – interpersonal relationship time. Everyone had to take their dishes to the sink and come back to the table and sit down. The conversation began in a light-hearted way, and you could share things that you liked and that were going well and that you appreciated about each other. But pretty soon, the conversation would get down into the things that were not going well. That was what this IPR time was really about: it was about airing the things that were creating conflict. One of the boys took too long in the shower, for example, and made another late for school. Someone borrowed something and didn’t put it back where it belonged. Someone else ate up all the chips.

After each complaint, Patrick’s mother – who acted as facilitator – would say to the named offender, “OK, Patrick, did you hear what Johnny was saying? Now, how would that make you feel?” Patrick admits that by this point, all six teenaged boys around the table were sorry that anyone brought anything up because it just wasn’t worth it. But he says looking back now, “We had to stay at the table, and we had to learn to tell the truth, to understand, to forgive, to reconcile, and to love one another.”

Forgiveness is hard. But this is the kind of relationships God seeks for us, where we can learn to tell the truth, grow in our understanding of each other, forgive and reconcile, and truly love each other. French theologian Christian Duquoc says, “Forgiveness is an invitation to the imagination. It is not ‘forgetfulness of the past’; rather, it is ‘the risk of a future other than one imposed by the past or by memory.’”

I like linking forgiveness and imagination. This invites us to be more open and thoughtful and creative about our pain – it calls us to think more about the kind of future we want rather than

reliving the painful parts of our past. God calls humanity to be this invested in each other – invested in each other’s futures. Perhaps it is only with God and the work of the Holy Spirit than any of us can even contemplate forgiveness, the generous release of the debts of others. To be forgivers, we must pray for God’s help. We must believe that God can work through the broken, the complicated, the messes of our lives. And we must trust that God’s grace and mercy is extended to us – genuinely and generously offered to our very lives.

David Noel Freedman is an Old Testament scholar who had memorized entire chapters of obscure passages of scripture in English and in Hebrew. Freedman knows the bible inside and out. His life personally and professionally has been spent immersed in scripture. Once asked if he could sum up what he had learned about the bible in once sentence, he thought for a but a moment and answered, “There is forgiveness.”

The Bible tells us there is forgiveness. God enabled there to be forgiveness. Christ showed us there was forgiveness. We must believe this is true for ourselves and be grateful. So grateful in fact that we are willing to extend that gift to others.

There is forgiveness – thanks be to God!

Amen.