

The First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2024

Practice the Forgiveness You Need

Mariann Budde

*Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation.*

—Psalm 25:3-4, Book of Common Prayer

A dentist has a sign on his office wall that reads: *Floss only the teeth you want to keep.* It occurs to me that an equivalent sign for our churches might be: *Practice only the forgiveness you need.*

As we begin the season that invites us into the heart of Jesus, forgiveness awaits us there as his gift and call to us. “Forgive us our sins,” he taught us to pray, “as we forgive those who sin against us.” A disciple once asked Jesus how many times he ought to forgive. Keeping score, Jesus told him, misses the point.

I was once on an airplane stuck on the tarmac for five hours. The woman to my right complained endlessly. Across the aisle a good-natured man engaged in pleasant conversation with those around him. They were both *practiced* in distinct ways of living—one striving to see the good in all things; the other in looking for, and generally finding, the worst. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes this as cultivating seeds within us.

“Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus urged his disciples the night before he died. He could have as easily said, “Forgive one another as I have forgiven you.” It is one of the hardest things Jesus asks of us, and the most important, for it is God’s way with us all.

Forgiveness for the deeper wounds doesn’t come easily. It takes time, courage, and sufficient internal healing to rebalance the scales of power. We often overlook the power dynamic involved in forgiveness, and how we must rebuild a foundation of inner strength in order to forgive.

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Forgiveness is not the same as excusing or forgetting. If we've hurt someone, we may be forgiven, but the effects of what we have done require repair. Reconciliation, the fruit of effort from both sides, isn't always possible.

Forgiveness, when it comes, often feels more like a gift we receive than something we do. Indeed, the harder we try to forgive, the more resentment we may feel. For what forgiveness requires is not effort, but openness. It often feels like letting go and allowing the grace of God in.

For all Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, he only has one thing to say about how to go about it: it begins in gratitude for the forgiveness God offers us each day. For Christians, forgiveness is not an option. Yet our capacity to practice forgiveness depends on our willingness to receive it ourselves.

Without question, forgiveness makes us much better travel companions on a delayed airplane. So choose which person on the plane, and in life, you would rather be. Then practice the forgiveness you need.



Monday, February 19, 2024

Grounding Forgiveness in Our Faith

For Christians, forgiveness is not an option. Yet our capacity to practice forgiveness depends on our willingness to receive it ourselves.

—Mariann Budde

Each Monday we will introduce a theme that will be our focus for the week. This week we will be focusing on grounding our practice of forgiveness in our faith.

In yesterday's reflections, Mariann Budde wrote about forgiveness: "It is one of the hardest things Jesus asks of us, and the most important, for it is God's way with us all." As Christians, we will find that when we ground our approach to forgiveness in the teachings of our faith, we are able to live more fully into who Jesus invites us to be.

For example, when Peter asks Jesus, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?," Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Our smaller selves tend to keep score, not just of the slights we receive, but also how much we do the right thing. Jesus invites Peter, and all of us, to live out of deeper, spiritual selves where we don't keep score of either our hurts or the opportunities we have to practice forgiveness.

Our lives are defined by both our beliefs and our actions. This week we'll look at how we can more deeply ground our actions of forgiveness in the beliefs and teachings of our faith.

Making it Personal: What do you think of Mariann Budde's words that "For Christians, forgiveness is not an option"? What Biblical stories or teachings come to mind for you when you think about forgiveness?

Tuesday, February 20, 2024

The Parable of the Forgiving Father

Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

—Luke 15:23-24

One of the most dramatic and memorable stories on forgiveness in the New Testament is the story known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). We included “Father” in the title of today’s reflection because we believe that it is his radical expression of forgiveness that is the heart of the story.

The entire text of the parable can be found in the back of this devotional on page 76. Each of the three lead characters of the story illustrates essential truths about forgiveness.

The younger brother, the prodigal, reminds us that when it comes to seeking forgiveness for ourselves, we have to be willing to overcome our pride and any desire we have to hide our vulnerability. The older brother reminds us that the natural human reaction to wrong-doing is often judgment and self-righteousness. It is this part of our ego that we often have to overcome in order to practice forgiveness.

The third person in the story, the forgiving father, embodies the kind of radical love and forgiveness that Jesus calls us to in our own lives. Jesus includes both the older brother’s and the father’s reactions because he knows all too well that each of us contains these two opposing natures within us. Sometimes we need to accept and confess our “older-brother nature” as the first step in letting it go in order to become more like the forgiving father.

Making it Personal: Do you recognize yourself in the older brother’s reaction to his prodigal sibling? If so, what helps you to extend compassion to that part of yourself so that you are able to respond more like the forgiving father?



Wednesday, February 21, 2024

Contemplative Practice: Gratitude

For all Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, he only has one thing to say about how to go about it: it begins in gratitude for the forgiveness God offers us each day.

—Mariann Budde

Today, and for the next four Wednesdays in Lent, we invite you to explore one of the contemplative practices we have included in the back of this devotional on pp. 84-87. Our hope is that one or more of these practices will deepen and enrich your spiritual journey, through Lent and beyond. The opening quote from last Sunday's reflection from Mariann offers a beautiful bridge between grounding forgiveness in our faith and a daily practice Jesus invites us to: A practice of gratitude.

In addition to Mariann's wisdom, there are many Bible passages that counsel us to be grateful. One that we often return to is: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Note that this passage encourages us to be grateful *in* all things, not necessarily *for* all things. A daily practice of gratitude can help to create a safe space in which to notice both what keeps us in the flow of God's love, and what obstructs our awareness of God's unceasing love and mercy.

A regular gratitude practice can offer us room to discover and name what touches our hearts and the hearts of others. And with a grateful heart, we are better able to see all the ways our longings and prayers join with God's longings and prayers for us.

Making it Personal: As often as is possible, write down three things for which you are grateful. Then, take a few moments to notice the ways, large and small, that being thankful has made a difference in your life and in your journey of faith. How might this practice deepen your experience of practicing forgiveness this Lent?

Thursday, February 22, 2024

Forgiveness in Action

*My humanity is bound up in yours, for
we can only be human together.*

—Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*

When grounding forgiveness in our faith, it is helpful not only to study the teachings of our faith, but also to be inspired by people who have put those teachings into practice. St. Francis is one example of a person who inspired others through his actions.

Desmond Tutu is another example, a modern saint who preached the good news of forgiveness by the way he lived his life. Even after death, he continues to teach us the true power of forgiveness through the way he facilitated the healing of South Africa in the wake of the devastating effects of apartheid.

He, along with his daughter Mpho Tutu, wrote about the healing power of forgiveness in their book, *The Book of Forgiving: The Four-fold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. Here is an excerpt from p. 7:

In South Africa, we chose to seek forgiveness rather than revenge. That choice averted a bloodbath. For every injustice, there is a choice. As we have said, you can choose forgiveness or revenge, but revenge is always costly. Choosing forgiveness rather than retaliation ultimately serves to make you a stronger and freer person. Peace always comes to those who choose to forgive. While both Mpho and I have seen the effects of drinking the bitter poison of anger and resentment—seen how it corrodes and destroys from the inside out—we have also seen the sweet balm of forgiveness soothe and transform even the most virulent situations. This is why we can say there is hope.

Making it Personal: Reread the excerpt and then pause to notice what speaks to you. Is there a person in your life who has inspired you by how they have practiced forgiveness? If so, what have you learned from them that you can practice in your life?



Friday, February 23, 2024

The Fruit of Forgiveness

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22

The passage from Galatians lists nine attributes as being the fruit of the Spirit. While forgiveness is not listed, we clearly believe it to be a fruit of the Spirit.

Or perhaps another way to say it is that when we practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we then will be able to more easily practice forgiveness. Let's look at a few reasons why.

Love, kindness, generosity, and gentleness are all part of what is offered when we forgive. Peace is more possible after forgiveness. Faithfulness, patience, and self-control are often needed in order to practice forgiveness. And joy is what we experience when we are able to freely love and forgive, as we beheld in the father's response in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

Another important reason we think of forgiveness as a fruit of the Spirit is that it is a helpful metaphor to remind us that our capacity to bear the fruit of forgiveness is directly related to the depth of our spiritual roots. When we actively nurture our faith, we will bear more spiritual fruit, including the fruit of forgiveness—both for ourselves, and for others.

Making it Personal: What connection do you see between the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians and forgiveness? What connection do you see between the state of your spiritual life and your capacity to offer forgiveness—both to yourself and to others?

Saturday, February 24, 2024

Listening to the Whispers

I found I had less and less to say, until finally, I became silent, and began to listen. I discovered in the silence the voice of God.

—Soren Kierkegaard

This week we focused on the connection between our faith and our practice of forgiveness. Mariann Budde's quote from her reflection for last Sunday sums up what we have considered this week. "For all Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, he only has one thing to say about how to go about it: it begins in gratitude for the forgiveness God offers us each day."

We also learned what Scripture teaches about forgiveness, reflecting on the Parable of the Forgiving Father (also known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son), and the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians. We were reminded of the value of a spiritual practice of gratitude. Finally, we were inspired by how Desmond and Mpho Tutu came to practice forgiveness as part of the healing of South Africa after apartheid ended.

As we will do each Saturday, we close our week by pausing to listen to the whispers of what God has revealed to us during the week. While the quotes and writings offered in this devotional are important, even more important is our willingness to pay attention to the whispers from God we are hearing as we engage with the material. May these help us to continue to focus more deeply on our own journey of forgiveness.

Making it Personal: Looking back on the readings for this first full week of Lent, as well as your own notes, was there a nudge or whisper from the Spirit for you? If so, is what you are sensing a source of comfort or is a source of challenge, or both? Is there something you have done, or some action that you want to take, as a result of what you are learning?
