

“Can We Forgive Unconditionally”

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1st Sunday of Lent

Luke 23:33-34

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We go through this season knowing the end of the story — that Jesus was crucified on the cross and rose from the dead. We now live in a post-resurrection world that is filled with hope and freedom because we are living on this side of the cross. It is helpful to know this because it helps pull us through the season of Lent.

We don't want to neglect the struggle of this season that calls us to self examination and being honest about how we have left God. We often need the light of hope to travel this journey.

As we honestly examine our lives and choices, we might turn up something we have done or not done that is so difficult to bear that we are not sure forgiveness is possible. The pain is so deep and perhaps the events are long in the past, but the pain is still raw.

Maybe a person who hurt us is not sorry, or doesn't understand the

impact of their actions, or maybe they continue to hurt us. This makes it hard to forgive them.

Does that feel familiar this morning? Perhaps it leaves us with a feeling that either forgiveness is not possible, or that we can only partially forgive — like forgiveness has limits and conditions.

Maybe we feel that full unconditional forgiveness in situations like this simply is not possible.

I want to skip ahead toward the end of Lent so that we can come back and take something helpful with us on this journey.

The scripture today gives us a snapshot ahead to Good Friday. This will help to frame our season of Lent around the theme of forgiveness.

READ LUKE 23:33-34

Let's think about this scene a bit more. Jesus was hanging there on the cross having been arrested by people who didn't understand his message or care so much about him, except that they perceived him to be a threat to their power. They were simply eliminating a perceived threat to their kingdom, like they had done a thousand

times before. It wasn't personal, it was business.

I can imagine that Jesus would have looked out at the people who nailed him up there on the cross and thought,

“If only you knew how much I love you. If only you knew that I don't want your power, but want to free you from the powers that bind you. If only you knew the kind of life you could have in the kingdom I am building. If only you could see, you would let nothing prevent you from joining me in joyfully creating this new world.”

But they couldn't see, and they didn't understand, and they relentlessly pursued Jesus, trapped him, and were now completing their task by eliminating him with violent methods designed to prolong pain and suffering and thereby deter others from trying to usurp their power.

In the middle of this, Jesus gives them a gift they never would have expected. He asks God to forgive them even while they have no understanding of the evil they are doing.

In other words, Jesus gives them unconditional, unearned, forgiveness, and holds no

bitterness or resentment toward them.

This is the culmination of God's forgiveness for us. It is unconditional. Nothing we do or don't do will prevent that forgiveness from being offered to us.

But this is an uncomfortable thing. We'd rather have God's forgiveness depend on what we do. We'd like to be rewarded with forgiveness when we attend church services regularly and follow God's commandments faithfully, read our Bibles, and do good for others. We'd rather work hard serving the poor and making generous, even sacrificial donations to the worthy Communion Offering causes, and as a result receive God's forgiveness for where we have failed.

Receiving the gift of forgiveness when we don't feel deserving can be uncomfortable.

But we can't gain any leverage or earn credits with God. “I cannot,” as my mentor Dr. Harold Ellens used to say, “live my life all week in charity and grace and then on Saturday night grab God by the shirt collar and declare ‘God, you owe me.’”

Neither can we sin our way out of God's grace. No matter how awful we have been, God continues to look on us, just as God looks on Jesus, with perfect love. Always. All the time. No exceptions!

This is the extent of God's radical unconditional, unearned grace and forgiveness.

We see this forgiveness on display in the scene on the cross where Jesus looks at those who are killing him and then prays to God for their forgiveness even while they don't understand the evil they are doing.

They were clueless, just as we are often clueless. But God forgave them and God has already forgiven us for everything. God's forgiveness doesn't depend on our behavior, our quality or our character, but instead on God's behavior, quality and character.

Sure, you might be thinking, Jesus can forgive because he is God, but I can't — it's just too hard.

This is where we get stuck, thinking we are not capable. However, we also read in the Bible with God all things are possible, and that includes forgiving others as God forgives us — unconditionally.

This is why the early church preserved these stories about how Jesus forgave others. They are a model for us to follow. They tell us that it is possible. They are encouragement to us that we can build community around a clean slate of forgiveness.

Will we be able to follow it perfectly every time? No.

Will we forgive and then again pick up the grudge? Sure.

Will we mess up and again punish people for hurting us? Certainly.

Will forgiveness be easy? Absolutely not.

But that doesn't mean that forgiving others unconditionally is impossible. It is possible because God made us by nature with the capacity to forgive.

Will it take a lot of hard work and in certain cases a long time? Absolutely!

Forgiving is foundational for people in God's Kingdom. It was a central part of Jesus' prayer, the one he taught his disciples and encapsulates the heart of Jesus' ministry. Jesus invites us to pray "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

God knew that we would hurt each other, but he made us with the capacity and the ability to forgive and continue in relationship. This is part of what it means to be human. Forgiving is simply something that that we do as followers of Jesus.

So, we choose to forgive, even when we doubt it will be fully possible.

We choose to forgive, then stand in the tension of not knowing how to do it unconditionally.

We choose to forgive with an openness and willingness to learn, to stretch, and to grow while seeking guidance from God's Holy Spirit.

We don't give up. We keep at it because it is possible. We keep our attention on giving up our pride, humbling ourselves, and giving up the right to punish others.

With hard work and time, and God's help eventually we will be able to forgive unconditionally and heal even the deepest wounds.