

“Forgiveness In Action”

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March 8, 2020

Genesis 50:15-21

Today we are talking about what forgiveness in action looks like. Sometimes we think of forgiveness as a mental exercise where we simply say some words to another person. We see the image of two angry-faced kids on a playground with a teacher standing between them saying “Now Billy, tell Alison you are sorry.”

Some of us don’t have a more mature picture of forgiveness than that. Today, I am going to offer three important elements in the process of forgiveness highlighted by two stories. The first is the Biblical story of Joseph, and the other, a real life story from Canada.

First, Joseph’s story — in brief.

Joseph was one of 12 sons of a man named Jacob, who was also named Israel. The family lived in the land of Canaan. These 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. As the story goes, Jacob loved his son Joseph more than his other sons and gave him special things, like

this fabulous expensive robe made of different colors of cloth. Of course this had his brothers despise him and become jealous. One day, with evil intent his brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt making it look as though he was killed by a wild animal.

But Joseph was given the gift of understanding dreams and along the way he interpreted the dreams of the pharaoh, who was so impressed that he placed Joseph second in command of all Egypt.

Then a multi-year famine came and Joseph’s brothers traveled to Egypt for food. Without recognizing him they ran into Joseph, who was coordinating the distribution of food for those in need. Joseph brought his brothers and family to Egypt to care for them.

This passage is right toward the end of the story after Jacob (the father of the 12 brothers) had died.

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This story highlights three important components of forgiveness.

1. In the process of forgiveness, we acknowledge the harm that was done.

Joseph directly speaks the truth that his brothers intended to harm him. He doesn't discard it or avoid it, but speaks it directly.

2. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, but remembering the harm done and holding it in a space of grace.

While acknowledging the intention to harm him, Joseph also holds open the possibility for redemption and reconciliation with his brothers.

3. In the process of forgiveness, we continually pay attention to the condition of our heart in relation to those who harmed us.

The final verse of this passage says that Joseph was speaking with kindness to his brothers when they expected he might take revenge. In other words, he paid attention to his attitude toward them, not returning evil for evil, but reassuring his brothers that he would not punish them. He was committed to remain in relationship with them, and they could count on him to continue working for their good.

To summarize these three components of forgiveness: acknowledge the harm done, hold it

with grace, and manage the condition of our heart.

We'll see these same three components of forgiveness in this second story that comes from Squamish, British Columbia.

It was dinner time on New Year's Eve 1997. Katy and her husband Bob were sitting down to eat dinner with several friends when they became aware of a huge party going on at a neighbor's house. Their neighbors were out of town, but a teenage son was home and had thrown a big party that was getting out of control. They were concerned, so Bob got up from the table, took two other men with him and headed over to break up the party.

The three men went inside the house and began asking everyone to leave, but they were met with resistance from about 200 drunk people. One guy punched Bob knocking him unconscious to the floor and then Ryan, a 20-year-old man, kicked him in the head four times not realizing that he caused a fatal brain hemorrhage.

Katy was left a widow with four-year-old twins.

While devastated, Katy chose not to harbor hate or vengeance in her heart, because she didn't want the death their father to control the lives of her kids.

It was four years later that investigators finally arrested Ryan, who confessed to the crime after carrying the insurmountable weight of guilt for too long. Katy immediately asked to meet him.

In her conversations with Ryan, she began with the first component of forgiveness. She spoke straight about the harm that had been done to her and her family and all of the hard work it took for her and the two kids to rebuild their lives.

This is the first and perhaps most important action to take in the process of forgiveness. We can't gloss over, deny or reject the impact of the harm that was done to us. The importance of being honest and specific about the harm is crucial and essential in the process of forgiveness.

Simply saying "My uncle hurt me." doesn't cut it. The harm needs to be named with specificity. Instead someone might say, "My mom left me alone at five years old for ten hours without any food in the house. Or, "My uncle touched me

inappropriately seven different times when he was watching me while my parents were working."

In certain situations, it is probably not a good idea to verbally share this with the person who has done the harm. But being responsible about acknowledging the specific truth regarding the harm both empowers a person and provides the foundation to forgive creating space for true repentance and redemption.

But Katy didn't stop there. She added the second component of forgiveness. Katy saw Ryan as a young man who was truly broken with guilt and on a reckless life path. She chose to stand with hope for his repentance, redemption, and healing.

So, Katy challenged Ryan to own his actions and be truthful about his past. To Ryan's surprise, she also committed to walk that journey of healing and forgiveness with him.

Perhaps the hardest thing Katy did was the third component of forgiveness — paying attention to how her heart related to Ryan. She described this part of forgiveness as a heart-breaking process while being connected with Ryan in their shared brokenness.

Because she remained connected, Katy learned that Ryan had been bullied and alienated as a child, had fallen into substance abuse and violent behavior as he sorted out his identity through adolescence. He was on a tough road.

But Katy refused to hold contempt for Ryan or try to make him pay for how he hurt her. Forgiveness is like canceling a debt that a person owes us, after it has been tallied.

There are times when the biggest hurdle to forgive is not so much having a spirit of unforgiveness, but facing the truth of the tally sheet — being honest about the magnitude of the harm that was done to us.

Sometimes we make excuses, we downplay it, say it was no big deal, etc, but this disempowers us and prevents us from truly forgiving.

Being honest about the tally sheet doesn't mean we give in to holding greater anger and bitterness toward the person. Being honest about the impact is altogether different from retaliating and punishing someone.

The process of forgiveness was far from a cop-out or soft in nature for Katy. Instead, it was transformational. It gave her a

voice and empowered her to rebuild her life, and then be an encouragement to others. Katy said that the hard work of forgiveness set her free to live a life of grace and possibility.

Katy began speaking to groups of kids and parents in schools and community centers about bullying, social responsibility, alcohol abuse, violence, forgiveness, as well as moving forward after unspeakable loss. Along the way, Katy invited Ryan to join her on stage to tell his part of their shared story.

Ryan talks about how Katy's forgiveness also transformed his life. Forgiveness ended his downward spiral and freed him from what he calls "mind imprisonment." Receiving forgiveness also gave him the strength and grace to face his own demons and the harm he had caused, and then created the freedom to make a major life-course correction.

The community of support around Katy's forgiveness gave him the foundation he needed to walk the long, hard journey of forgiving himself.

In recent years, Ryan got married and started his own family. That

never would have been possible had it not been for the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness truly brings the life of Heaven into this world and God's future healing into the present time. Forgiveness is truly the foundation of life in God's Kingdom.

May we all focus our minds and our hearts with commitment and courage in the process of forgiveness.