



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish**  
**Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401**

Parish Offices & Education Building  
 Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.  
 Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333  
 Fax 410-280-3181  
[www.stannes-annapolis.org](http://www.stannes-annapolis.org)

## *Forgiveness*

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on  
 The Seventh Sunday After The Epiphany, February 20, 2011

In his short story, “The Capital of the World,” Ernest Hemmingway begins with a joke about forgiveness. He writes, “Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, on one level, I suppose, this is a joke about how many boys are named Paco in Madrid. But the joke works only because, at another level, many people, whether they are sons or daughters, mothers or fathers, are longing for forgiveness. The offer of “all is forgiven” goes out, and hundreds of people come running. It does seem like so many of us are, in so many ways, longing for forgiveness. We may have done something, or said something, or didn’t do something or didn’t say something for which we are deeply sorry and we long for the cooling waters of forgiveness to wash us clean. Or we may have been wronged or hurt or betrayed, and we are still holding a grudge, and it is eating us up inside, and we want to just let it go, to forgive, and to get on with our life. In so many ways, many of us are longing for the experience of true and genuine forgiveness. In so many ways, we all want to hear the message “all is forgiven.”

Perhaps that’s why forgiveness was one of the top three topics people wrote in for this sermon series. People wrote in questions like, “How can we forgive?” and, “What does forgiveness mean?” I think these questions are reflective of the wider culture we live in where forgiveness is really something of a hot topic today. There is a growing body of literature on the meaning and nature of forgiveness which ranges from the scientific to self-help. One of my favorites on the research end of things is by Frans de Waal, of Emory University, who studies forgiveness among monkeys and apes, and which raises the obvious question: Who is better at forgiveness monkeys or humans? Well, here’s what de Waal says in his book *Peacemaking Among Primates*, “Reconciliation is crucial: immediately after a fight two adversaries tend to stay away from each other, but after a time one approaches the other and tries to make friendly contact. The length of the process varies; whereas monkeys generally make up within minutes,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemmingway, “The Capital of the World,” *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987)

humans can take days, years, even generations to do the same.”<sup>2</sup> I don’t know if you find that result is surprising or not!

In any event, today’s topic will be forgiveness. Like the other topics in this series, we will only be able to scratch the surface in the short span of a sermon. I will invite you to consider a couple of the major ways people have thought about forgiveness. But today I want to begin with our Gospel lesson because it is a classic passage about forgiveness. It’s from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

Now Jesus’ counsel to turn the other cheek has generated an enormous amount of comment and interpretation. It seems clear enough that Jesus is ruling out retaliation. He did not say “if someone strikes on the right cheek, well then you strike him back on the right cheek.” That much seems clear. The debate centers on the question of whether Jesus is counseling passivity in the face of evil or if he is saying something else. As surprising as it might sound, many scholars are saying that when Jesus said to turn the other cheek he was not telling us to be passive in the face of wrongdoing. Rather, they say Jesus was giving us a third alternative, beyond the typical responses of fight or flight. Turning the other cheek provides us with a way of standing up to wrongdoing and diffusing the situation without resorting to retaliation or violence. So being committed to the type of forgiveness found in turning the other cheek doesn’t mean being a doormat.

Here is how Walter Wink explains this passage.<sup>3</sup> He begins by wondering why Jesus specifies the right cheek. He says, “How does one strike another on the right cheek, anyway? Try it. A blow by the right-fist in a right-handed world would land on the left cheek of the opponent. To strike the right cheek with the fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks... The only way one could strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the right hand. What we are dealing with here is unmistakably an insult, not a fist fight. The intention is not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her place ... a backhand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors.”

Wink claims that Jesus was addressing people who were regularly subjected to these types of indignities. They were people who were usually on the receiving end of a backhand. Why then, Wink asks, would Jesus tell these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek. He answers, “Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, ‘try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. You cannot demean me.’”

So turning the other cheek reasserts one’s dignity in the face of an insult. But Wink says is also does more than this. Turning the other cheek also creatively disarms the other person. By turning the other cheek one deflects the person from being able to back hand you again. Now the other person, if he is to strike you again, must punch you in the nose using a fist. But that would be to treat you as an equal and the whole point of the backhand was to demean you in the first place. According to Wink, Jesus’s counsel to turn the other cheek is not telling us to become punching bag. Rather, it creatively, and without resort to violence, asserts our humanity, refuses to succumb to humiliation, and creatively diffuses the situation.

So when later in our Gospel lesson Jesus goes on to say to love your enemy he was not telling us to be doormats or punching bags. Rather, he was saying, don’t engage in the

<sup>2</sup> See Frans de Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990)

<sup>3</sup> See Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003)

demeaning and dehumanization behavior of your enemies. Despite their wrongdoing, which should not be accepted, they are human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity. And by treating them with love rather than with hatred we will be like God in heaven, who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The creative response of turning the other cheek shows how we can concretely love our enemies by diffusing the violence which would only lead to more violence and creating the context in which forgiveness and reconciliation can take place. So the upshot of this interpretation is that forgiveness is not about being a doormat or punching bag, but rather is a way in which we can love our enemies and seek reconciliation with them.

So, in light of what Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, What is forgiveness and How do we go about it? This morning I want to look at a couple of answers to these questions. There are, of course, hundreds of answers to these questions. But in the short space of this sermon I want to touch on only two: one from a psychologist and another from a theologian.

First, the psychologist.<sup>4</sup> Robert Enright defines forgiveness this way: “When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love.” For Enright, there are three important aspects of forgiveness. First, the offense is taken seriously. Forgiveness is not pretending that a wrong didn’t happen. It includes the claim that what was done was wrong and ought not to be repeated. Second, victims do have a moral right to anger. They were treated unjustly and a certain amount of resentment and anger is justified because it says what was done violated one’s basic dignity. And third, victims give up their moral right to anger and resentment. Forgiveness is a gift to the offender who may not necessarily deserve it.

Enright claims that forgiveness is both psychological and social: psychological because the forgiver is freed from anger and resentment and social because forgiveness involves another person. In its social aspect forgiveness may open the door to reconciliation, but it should not be confused with reconciliation because that would involve a change and a renewal of trust on both sides. Rather, forgiveness is unconditional, an unmerited gift that replaces resentment toward the wrongdoer with feelings of love and generosity. As Enright puts it, “in spite of everything the offender has done forgiveness means treating him or her as a member of the human community.”

That’s the psychologist. Now the theologian.<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf describes forgiveness in a way that is rather similar to Enright. However, Volf brings God into the discussion. He says, “For Christians, forgiving always takes place in a triangle, involving the wrongdoer, the wronged person, and God. Take God away and the foundations of forgiveness become unsteady and may even crumble.” So for Volf, the relationship to God qualifies and grounds forgiveness.

Like Enright, Volf begins by saying that, first of all, to forgive is to name the wrongdoing and to condemn it. Forgiveness is not excusing or pardoning the offense. There is a moral dimension of forgiveness that points out that an injustice has occurred. But the second aspect of forgiveness is giving wrongdoers the free gift of not counting the wrongdoing against them. Volf says the generous release of a genuine debt is the heart of forgiveness.

So far, Volf and Enright are basically saying the same thing. But Volf, the theologian, goes further by bringing God into the picture. Volf says, “God is the God who forgives. We forgive because God forgives. We forgive by echoing God’s forgiveness. So to understand our own forgiving we need to start with God’s.” And for Volf, God’s forgiveness begins with God’s love for the world. God’s love for the world does not mean God thinks everything is hunky dory

---

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)

with the world. Rather, because God loves the world and cares for the world, God condemns the wrongdoing in the world, because things aren't the way they ought to be. But rather than punish the world in strict justice God forgives. Volf says that in scripture we hear God's forgiveness described in various ways: it says, *God does not reckon sin, God covers our sin, God puts our wrongdoing behind God's back, God removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, God blots out our sin, God sweeps away our sin like the mist, and God doesn't even remember our sins.* All of these metaphors are ways of talking about God's forgiveness. God has the right to condemn the wrongdoing in our world, and yet in a free gift God forgives the wrongdoing of the world.

Volf says, our forgiving should echo the forgiveness of God, which sounds pretty similar to Jesus statement in our Gospel lesson, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." God is the God who forgives. We forgive because God forgives. We forgive by echoing God's forgiveness. As Walter Wink puts it, "In the final analysis, then, love of enemies is trusting God for the miracle of divine forgiveness. If God can forgive, redeem, and transform me, I must also believe that God can work such wonders with anyone. Love of enemies is seeing one's oppressors through the prism of the Reign of God – not only as they now are but also as they can become: transformed by the power of God."

It does seem like so many of us are longing for forgiveness. We long to hear a message that says, "all is forgiven." We want to put away our past mistakes and failings, and we want to let go of our grudges and anger. We want to move into a new future without fear and where our souls are liberated. This morning we explored a couple of views of forgiveness which you may or may not find helpful. There are of course many others. Regardless of which view you find most helpful, it does seem important that as a community we hear Jesus' extraordinary sayings to turn the other cheek and to love our neighbors over and over again. These are hard sayings and we need to hear our different ways of understanding them. As we have seen this morning, Jesus was not telling us to be doormats or punching bags. But he was also saying that there is a better way than the way of anger and vengeance. He calls us to find creative ways to resist wrongdoing, to affirm our humanity and dignity, and also to affirm the humanity and dignity of the wrongdoer at the same time. By loving and forgiving our enemies we participate in the miracle of divine forgiveness and we experience a little bit of the kingdom of heaven right now. And for many of us, that is a kingdom for which we pray daily when we say, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.