

Ash Wednesday – Forgiveness  
Pastor Neal Nybo

Mack: Ok Papa, you want to take away one more thing that darkens my heart. What is it?...I already know. Papa, how can I ever forgive that SOB who killed my Missy. If he were here today, I don't know what I would do. I know it isn't right but I want him to hurt like he hurt me... if I can't get justice, I still want revenge.

Forgiveness was the final healing that Papa had for Mack. It may have been the hardest. It is certainly one of the most integral and misunderstood elements of the good news of our faith.

Misunderstood, forgiveness can be misused, even used as a weapon. I was supervising a customer service department in a Christian company. One customer service rep had begun showing up late to work, missing days without explanation and was surly to his coworkers. I sat down with him to talk about it. Almost before I could say anything he interrupted me with the request, "*Will you forgive me?*" I hardly thought his infractions needed forgiving but he insisted. "*Yes*", I told him, "*I forgive you.*" He turned back around in his seat, end of conversation. I said we still needed to talk about his behavior. "*No you can't,*" he said, "*you have forgiven me, it's forgotten, you cannot punish me or bring it up again.*" I felt like forgiving his sassy mouth right out the back door and the rest of him with it.

Tonight we join Christ on a journey of healing and wholeness on the road to Easter. And on that road we have a chance to relearn Forgiveness. Does it mean forgive and forget? Does forgiving someone let them get away with something? Why is our being forgiven so closely tied to our willingness to forgive?

We pray, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, but why would it be true that we are forgiven only to the extent that we forgive others? The big question is, are we ready to forgive or are we like Mack, who did not want his daughter's murderer forgiven? He wanted him punished.

Only some of us have wounds as painful as Mack's. How does this work in the lives of the rest of us? Recently, there has been a person in my life that I had not forgiven. He had not done terrible things to me or my family. But he had done enough that I felt hurt and I did not want to forgive him. Less than a month ago, a friend asked me something I am going to ask you in a few minutes. He asked me, "*Why won't you forgive him?*"

I thought about it and found the answer. I didn't want to forgive him because I didn't want him to get away with what he had done. And, I didn't trust God to deal with him. But, now my friend's question challenged me. It called on me to trust God in a new way. It challenged me to humbly walk in the footsteps of Jesus as he walked the road of forgiveness towards Jerusalem and the cross. And, that takes more than a sentimental, half hearted, "*I forgive you.*" Luke records this about Jesus:  
Luke 9:51, 52

51As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

As the time approached, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He turned his face towards the hardest test of his life. He began walking towards God's destiny for him. He would walk past worshippers shouting hosanna, and he would walk through temptations, betrayals, and suffering. It was the journey of our forgiveness and we are invited to walk it with him. Can we resolutely set out to meet him? But, I warn you now, this journey requires forgiveness. There is a divine mystery about forgiveness, a tie between our ability to forgive someone else and our ability to be forgiven.

The mystery is in the Lord's Prayer.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6:12

Whether we like it or not, there is some kind of connection between our relationship with others and our relationship with God. The Gospel of Mark says, "*when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*"

If you have anything against anyone.

And it goes the other way as well. The Gospel of Matthew says, "*if you remember that your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled to him; then come and offer your gift.*"

There's more.

The Gospel of Luke says "*Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*" Luke 6:37

And it was Jesus himself who said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" Luke 23:34

With such clear teaching, why would we not walk the path of forgiveness? Why would we not? I have one idea. Actually, it's a vivid picture of what unforgiveness looks like. I understand abstract ideas better when I can get a picture of them in my mind. And, over the last few years, when I pray for people, I have begun to ask God for a picture for that person. Often the image that makes sense only to that person but this time the meaning was as clear as a bell.

A woman I know, was hurt by someone this past year. It's been a hard year for her as she has tried to get through the pain. A few weeks ago she told me she still had a few choice adjectives for the person who hurt her. She wasn't ready to give them up. Maybe someday, but she wanted to hold on to them for now. Her friends supported this idea that it was O.K. to hold onto some anger. She asked, "*What's wrong with it?*" I prayed for her and an image of those adjectives jumped into my mind. There she was talking but instead of adjectives she wasn't willing to give up it was big hissing lizards that had grabbed hold of and were riding on her shoulders. These were nasty looking lizards and boy could they hiss. And, the whole time they were on her, their claws dug into her shoulders and her

blouse was soaked red front and back. She would wince in pain every time they moved. And, they hissed at other people and kept them at a distance. But she wouldn't take them off. When asked she would say they were her protection from the person who hurt her. But, that person wasn't even in the room! They hissed at everyone except that person, affecting all her relationships and hurting her but still she would not take them off.

Back to the question my friend asked me a few weeks ago. What he really asked was, "*Neal, when are you going to take that lizard off your shoulder? When are you going to forgive that person?*" I accepted his question as an invitation from Papa and my friend prayed with me as I forgave and asked Jesus to help me forgive.

When will you get rid of the lizards on your shoulders? And there are more lizards than unforgiveness like bitterness, lust, loneliness, shame, guilt, but they all hiss and scratch. In a few minutes we will invite you to come forward to receive the ashes as a mark of humility and trust in God. Will you also accept them as a sign that you have at least stepped onto the path of forgiveness? I've got a little more to say about why we don't forgive but let's take a minute and let this one sink in.

## **Part Two**

There is a little more to my story of forgiving than I have told you. There is a part of me in that story that I am not proud of. Once I had worked through the part of releasing him to God and trusting God to be good, there was something else. It had to do with how I saw myself, with my image of myself. I realized a part of me was living my life in contrast to the image I had of that person. I was the good guy, compared to him as the insensitive one. When I forgave him, I would just be me and would I be as good in my own eyes when I wasn't comparing myself to him?

How do you see yourself? Do you have an image of yourself that is related to someone else? Many people have images attached to lizards. Many years ago, I met a man at a social gathering. He could have told me anything about himself he wished. What he told me was how hurt he was over a devastating divorce filled with abandonment and betrayal. His hurt was fresh and right on the surface. I thought his divorce must have just been finalized. But, when I asked when his ex-wife left him, he said, "*Seven years ago.*"

It takes a long time to get over hurt like that but his hurt had become his identity. He hated it but it was all he had. We become self defined as victim, ex-spouse, abandoned son, abused daughter, unfit parent, unappreciated employee, unfairly treated, unjustly judged, ugly, overweight, stupid. It is a tragedy that many people will keep the lizards and the hurt as their identity because it is the last remnant of the life they knew. He may be a good for nothing ex husband, but he's my ex-husband, ex-boss, ex-pastor, ex whatever. Our identity is entangled with something negative in our past and we've lived with that identity so long we don't know how to be anything else and we may even fear we will be nothing if we aren't that. It's like a scratchy, smelly wool blanket that at least keeps us warm from the cold world.

But, while the world may be cold, the love of Christ burns with a heartwarming, lizard roasting flame. When we release our past and those in it we are not left without an identity. We are given a new one.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

2 Cor. 5:17

*What does that new creation, that new identity look like?*

Here is what the Bible says about our identity in Jesus.

You and I are children of God, Friends of Jesus, citizens of heaven, filled with a spirit, not of fear, but of power, love and self-discipline. We are chosen, adopted, included, victorious, blameless, set free, safe, salt of the earth, light of the world and more than conquerors.

Jesus offers us a totally new identity, defined by our relationship with God and by his love for us. Lizards keep us defined by our relationships with those who hurt us and circumstances that happened to us. And that is the missing piece of the puzzle for me. The answer to why our forgiveness is connected to our forgiving others. It's because as long as we don't forgive we are defined by unforgiveness, identified with the unforgiven. Forgiving identifies us with Christ so that all that old passes away and all becomes new.

I saw a speaker recently talking about Jesus. He kept gesturing upward, as though he couldn't help himself. As he talked he almost seemed lighter, like he would first stand on tiptoes and then maybe even lift off a little. Why not, when his identity is one of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So what will it be for us tonight? The lightness that comes with forgiveness and identity in Christ, or will you keep your lizards? Imagine the weight of hatred, conflict, jealousy, rage, selfishness, rebellion, envy. Will you stay wrapped in an uncomfortable blanket of regret or will you come warm yourself at the fire of Christ's love? Let the ashes mark the death of the old and communion be the life of the new.