

Partial Truths Series

Forgive and Forget
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534
April 30th, 2017
3rd Sunday in Eastertide



1. Just shy of Mary Johnson's 40th birthday, her only son was shot and killed.
 - a. He was 20.
 - i. Mary wanted justice.
 - ii. "[The boy who killed my son] was an animal. He deserved to be caged."
 - b. Mary got what she wanted.
 - i. 16-year old O'Shea Israel was sentenced as an adult to 25.5 years in prison.
 - c. At the trial which happened 18 months after the murder, Mary describes what she was thinking:
 - i. "I'm a Christian woman so I know that in order to be forgiven, that I must forgive.
 - ii. So I told him at the trial that I forgave him.
 - iii. And I didn't think it was lip service, but over the years I found out, yes, that's all it was, was lip service.
 - iv. I was doing what the Word says, but it was not really in my heart.
 - v. I was saying I was forgiving, but I was far from forgetting."¹
2. The phrase "forgive and forget" is not found in the Bible.
 - a. This phrase dates from the 1300s and was a proverb by the mid-1500s.
 - b. The individual words "forgive" and "forget" are throughout scripture.
 - c. Some form of the word forgive (forgives, forgiving, forgiven, forgiveness) is used 123 times in the bible and is usually associated with God forgiving us or our asking for forgiveness.

¹ http://www.fromdeathtolife.us/speaking_files/TranscriptOrtbergJohnsonIsrael2011.pdf Accessed April 26, 2017.

- d. Forget is used 52 times in the Bible, mostly as an admonition for humanity not to forget God's gracious love and mercy or to reinforce that God will not forget God's covenant with us.
 - i. In our epistle lesson this morning, James contrasts hearers and doers of the word.
 - 1. Hearers only forget the grace given to them.
 - 2. Doers remember the grace and act that way toward others.
- e. The only time forget is used in any way like forgive and forget is in the excerpts from Joseph's story we read this morning.
 - i. Joseph names his eldest Manasseh.
 - 1. (*Hebrew: מְנַשֶּׁה; Septuagint: Manassê; c. 2nd millennium BC*) was the eldest son of Joseph and the Egyptian Aseneth (*Genesis 41:50-51; 46:20*).
 - 2. The name means "he that causes to forget."
 - 3. Joseph explained giving his son that name this way: "God made me forget all my hardship, and all my father's house." (*Genesis 41:51*)
 - ii. Joseph forgives his brothers.
 - 1. Consider how amazing Joseph's forgiveness is.
 - 2. His brothers captured him, sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead.
 - 3. As we heard in this morning's reading, once the brothers recognized who Joseph was in Egypt, they were petrified he would understandably hold a grudge against them.
 - 4. The brothers remind Joseph that his father hoped Joseph would forgive his brothers.
 - 5. The brothers ask Joseph to forgive them their crimes and offer themselves as his slaves.
 - 6. Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." (*Genesis 50:19-21*)
 - iii. Do you think it was easy for Joseph to forgive his brothers?
 - 1. Do you think Joseph, even before his brothers begged for forgiveness, could name his child "he that causes to forget" without any struggle?
 - 2. No, he follows an identifiable 3-step pattern.

- a. While being held in prison and in slavery, Joseph grieves and laments the loss of everything he has ever known, the betrayal of his brothers, and his own prideful ways.
 - b. He chooses to pardon his brothers.
 - c. And finally, he names his son Manasseh as a constant reminder of his choice to be liberated from his lament and his loss.
 - f. Who else has a forgiveness pattern like that of Joseph's?
 - i. Jesus, of course.
 - ii. He grieves his losses by withdrawing to pray, by agonizing over his friend's inability to stay awake with him, by crying out against even God's forsaking him.
 - iii. He chooses to forgive his disciples, the authorities and us.
 - iv. And he rises again as our eternal example of grace and mercy.
- 3. Jesus does not explicitly ask us to forgive and forget, but he repeatedly teaches us to forgive and actively behave as if we have forgiven.
 - a. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matthew 5:7)
 - b. Later in that same sermon, Jesus says, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Matthew 5:23-24 (NIV)
 - c. Christ's admonitions for forgiving are found in Mark and Luke as well.
 - i. "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Mark 11:25 (NIV)
 - ii. "But I tell you: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." Luke 6:27-29 (NIV)
 - iii. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Luke 6:36 (NIV)
 - iv. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Luke 6:37 (NIV)
 - d. Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) to teach that we should forgive without limits.

- i. "Peter came to Jesus and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." Matthew 18:21-22 (NKJV)
- e. The Prodigal Son is perhaps the most familiar parable about forgiveness.
 - i. After the eldest son wastes his inheritance and returns home disgraced, his father welcomes him home with open arms saying, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is now found!"
- f. Jesus even asked for God's forgiveness of those who crucified him.
 - i. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" Luke 23: 34 (ESV)
- g. If Jesus does not explicitly tell us "forgive and forget", why bother with this difficult forgetting?
 - i. Both the Old and New Testaments tell us God remembers our sins no more.
 1. The prophet Isaiah recounts God saying "I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." (Isaiah 43:25 NRSV)
 2. The prophet Jeremiah records God saying, "I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken." (Jeremiah 31:34 TEV)
 3. The letter written to the Hebrews says, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." (Hebrews 8:12)
 4. Paul writes, "God did not keep an account of their sins." (2 Corinthians 5:19 TEV)
- h. But that forgetting seems impossible!
 - i. Each year I teach confirmation classes, I have a section on sin and forgiveness.
 - ii. Inevitably, somebody asks if God expects us to forgive and forget.
 1. Guess who things we should – the adult mentors or the eighth graders?
 2. You are correct – it is the eighth graders who say God wants us both to forgive and to forget.
 3. Adults will understandably point to situations where forgetting might put us at continuous risk for further harm – such as instances of domestic violence.

4. Adults will also hold the logic that it is impossible to truly forget what somebody has done to us.
- iii. What does God mean by remembering our sins no more? Blotting out our transgressions? Keeping no account?
 1. Do you remember how Isaiah notes God saying God does this for God's own sake?
 2. Mary Johnson said the same thing about forgiving Oshea Israel.
 - a. She realized that her saying "I forgive you" at his trial was not really forgiving.
 - b. Mary said, "Unforgiveness is like cancer – it will eat you from the inside out.
 - i. The forgiveness is not for Oshea.
 - ii. The forgiveness is for me."²
4. If we look at psychology texts or watch YouTube videos about forgiveness, the advice most often given is to forgive the person, but warily do not forget what they have done.
 - a. Some will even quote scripture noting we are to be as wise as serpents. (Matthew 10:16 NRSV)
 - b. This preponderance of advice reveals why forgive and forget is a partial truth.
 - i. Forgive and forget misses the critical step both Joseph and Jesus made when they could move on from the harm done to them.
 1. Before we can forgive, we must feel grief.
 2. At the most basic level, forgiveness is on a continuum with grief.
 3. Being offended, hurt or violated can each be a loss—whether we lose affection or a human being or a dream.
 4. And when we lose something, human beings have a natural reintegration process, which we call grief.
 5. Forgiveness is the resolution of grief.
 - ii. A deep human being feels pain and allows oneself to suffer because that's part of the human experience.
 1. Without acknowledging that we've been wounded and we've lost something, we don't gain the benefit of the experience.

² CBS News. Steve Hartman reports June 7, 2011 on the power of forgiveness. Viewed April 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2BITY-3Mp4>

2. By acknowledging that we've been hurt and mistreated, we open a path to healing.
 3. Power comes from the experience.
 4. A deep human being relinquishes suffering—he or she doesn't maintain it forever, doesn't create his or her personality around it, and doesn't use it as a weapon.
 5. A deep human being does not cling to the negative part of the experience to have an excuse for failures.
- iii. Forgiveness is being resilient when things don't go the way we want.
1. Joseph wanted to continue to be his father's favorite son.
 - a. Joseph's brothers said, "no!"
 2. Jesus wanted humanity to share the goodness God gifted everyone.
 - a. Humanity said, "no!"
 3. Like Joseph and Jesus, we must be at peace with "no," be at peace with what is, be at peace with the vulnerability inherent in human life.
 4. Then, and only then, are we able to move forward and live life without prejudice.
 5. The absence of prejudice informs forgiveness.
 6. We realize that nobody owes us, that we don't have to take the hurt we suffered and pay it forward to someone else.
- c. With an open heart, we move forward and accept what is, without prejudice.
- d. **OUR COMPLETE TRUTH IS NOT FORGIVE AND FORGET, BUT FEEL, FORGIVE AND FORGET.**
5. How was Mary able to feel grief, forgive Oshea and forget the pain of losing her son?
 - a. Listen to Mary and Oshea tell National Public Radio's Story Corps how they journeyed from the murder to living next door to one another and traveling the nation sharing their forgiveness project.
 6. MJ: You and I met at Stillwater Prison. I wanted to know if you were in the same mindset of what I remembered from court, where I wanted to go over and hurt you. But you were not that 16-year-old. You were a grown man. I shared with you about my son.

7. OI: And he became human to me. You know, when I met you it was like, ok, this guy, he's real. And then, when it was time to go, you broke down and started shedding tears. The initial thing to do was just try and hold you up as best I can—just hug you like I would my own mother.
8. MJ: After you left the room, I began to say: "I just hugged the man that murdered my son." And I instantly knew that all that anger and the animosity, all the stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for you—I knew it was over, that I had totally forgiven you.
9. OI: As far as receiving forgiveness from you—sometimes I still don't know how to take it because I haven't totally forgiven myself yet. It's something that I'm learning from you – I won't say that I have learned yet – because it's still a process that I'm going through.
10. MJ: I treat you as I would treat my son. And our relationship is beyond belief. We live next door to one another.
11. OI: Yeah. So you can see what I'm doing—you know first hand. We actually bump into each other all the time leaving in and out of the house. And, you know, our conversations, they come from "Boy, how come you ain't called over here to check on me in a couple of days? You ain't even asked me if I need my garbage to go out!"
12. MJ: Uh-huh.
13. OI: I find those things funny because it's a relationship with a mother for real.
14. MJ: Well, my natural son is no longer here. I didn't see him graduate. Now you're going to college. I'll have the opportunity to see you graduate. I didn't see him getting married. Hopefully one day, I'll be able to experience that with you.
15. OI: Just to hear you say those things and to be in my life in the manner which you are is my motivation. It motivates me to make sure that I stay on the right path. You still believe in me. And the fact that you can do it despite how much pain I caused you—it's like amazing.
16. MJ: I know it's not an easy thing, you know, to be able to share our story together. Even with us sitting here looking at each other right now, I know it's not an easy thing. So I admire that you can do this.
17. OI: I love you, lady.

18. MJ: I love you too, son.³
 - a. Partial truth: forgive and forget.
 - b. Full truth: Feel, forgive and forget.
19. I'd like to give you each an invisible gift.
 - a. The gift is a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you are today.
 - b. Some of them may be here right now. Some may be far away.
 - c. Wherever they are, if they've loved you and encouraged you and wanted what was best in life for you, they're right inside yourself.
 - d. So let's just take half a minute in honor of those who have cared about us all along the way. Don't worry, close your eyes and think about them. I'll keep track of the time.
20. Whomever you've been thinking about, imagine how grateful they must be that during your silent times you remember how important they are to you.
 - a. It's not the honors or the prizes which ultimately nourish our souls.
 - b. It's the knowing that we are worth the investment God and others have made in us, that the bedrock of our lives from which we make our choices is very good stuff.
21. Now I want to give you an invisible miracle drug.
 - a. Scientists have proven the health benefits of forgiving others and setting ourselves free from the pain of holding on to the hurts.
 - b. So take a moment to hold two images in your mind's eye: that of the person whom you just remembered and the person who somehow said 'no' to you.
 - c. As you go about your day today, let yourself feel the grief of that 'no'.
 - d. But feel it bolstered by the loving strength of the person who has helped you become who you are.
 - e. Remind yourself that forgiveness is a process that takes time.
 - f. Do not expect that you will be able to move onto forgiving the person until you have let yourself grieve the loss.
 - g. When you are ready, with God's help and the loving thoughts of whomever you remembered, choose compassion, and live your life liberated.
 - h. Feel, forgive and forget.
 - i. Amen.

³ StoryCorps.org Accessed April 26, 2017. <https://storycorps.org/listen/mary-johnson-and-oshea-israel/>