

## Christ's Gift of Forgiveness and Healing

Luke 24: 44-53

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On September 28, 2007 Randy Pausch gave his last lecture. He was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Pausch was forced to deliver an untimely and very literal last lecture after facing the diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. Professor Pausch used this opportunity to take the audience on a rollicking and riveting journey through the lessons of his life.

He talked about the importance of childhood dreams, and the stamina needed to overcome obstacles. "Brick walls are there for a reason," he insisted, showing slides of the rejection letters he had received over the years. "They let us prove how badly we want things." He pushed his audience to show patience toward others, saying, "Wait long enough, and people will surprise and impress you." He celebrated his mentors and his students with an open heart, and revealed the depth of his love for his family. Pausch made his last lecture count, inspiring millions of people and helping them to search for what is most important in life.

Today's words from scripture contain Jesus last lecture to his disciples before he is taken up to heaven. He can't help himself but he remains a teacher through and through. He reiterates to the disciples what is most important to be remembered and to be shared as they go out into the world to preach the good news. What is really important to Jesus? Forgiveness. It is the key ingredient of understanding and loving the God that Jesus wants people to believe in.

As we know, Jesus stood for a lot of things – love, justice, acceptance, compassion, and healing but forgiveness was a central theme in his teaching. When he is asked about how to pray, forgiveness is right up there next to praying for daily bread. When Peter asks him how much it is necessary to forgive, Jesus says, "Seventy Seven times," which translates into always and constantly. He told stories about barren fig trees, bent over women, lost sheep, lost coins, and prodigal son – all stories about the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness becomes personal when Jesus forgives those who have

hung him on a cross, and he extends forgiveness to his friends who have deserted him in his time of need. Forgiveness, according to Jesus teachings, is the key to a fresh start – with God and between people. And it seems that when forgiveness happens and is accepted, healing follows. Interestingly, those two go together.

The evidence speaks for itself that forgiveness is one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith. We love to talk about it. We intellectually understand the concept and what good it can do, what healing it can bring, but, boy, do we have a hard time practicing the very same as individual, as Christians, as a community of faith, as the church universal.

Why is forgiveness –be it from God, oneself, to and from each other, pretty much every day and all the time – so important? Because we are always in need of it. Because we human beings have the tendency to screw up! Whether out of insecurity, bad training, or habit, we all too often put our wants, needs, desires ahead of those of others. And so we hurt the people around us. And they hurt us.

We all know what I'm talking about. There is not a single person sitting in this sanctuary who hasn't been hurt in some way recently, and who hasn't also hurt someone else. That is just life in this world. We screw up -which means that forgiveness is perhaps the essential ingredient in our relationships at home, work, school, church, and all the rest. We know how unhealthy it is to live in an unforgiving state. It is like a wound that will not heal, an illness that will not go away until we feel ready to forgive and feel we have been forgiven. We know what damage this unforgiving state can do to our relationships. It drives families apart. Nothing good can come from holding on to grudges and hurts.

But if it's hard for us to forgive others, it's often harder for us to forgive ourselves. Who here doesn't carry regrets of hurtful things said or done? Who here at some time or another hasn't thought, "if only I hadn't...?" You and I can waste a lot of good energy mucking in the mire of regrets and if only's.

I think that we also know – intellectually – what will change if we manage to forgive or accept forgiveness. It will free us. Our lives no longer will have to be shaped by and burdened by the grudge or anger or hatred we have been carrying. When we get to the point of forgiving ourselves, then we have more peace and freedom to live the fullness of life God intends for us. But all of that is really hard. Why can't we get there? What gets in the way of forgiveness?

The answer is not perfect, but I think we can glean help from how Jesus practiced forgiveness. By the way, in case you were wondering, forgiveness is a practice, a spiritual discipline; not a one-time deal but an ongoing commitment to restore communion with God and one another.

God's gift of forgiveness is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When he became human, he made himself vulnerable to the good, the bad, and the ugly that humankind has to offer – especially all the ways people diminish, betray, oppress and abandon one another.

Even though Jesus was vulnerable to these and in fact, experienced pretty much all of them, he did not allow himself to be defined by them. Instead, he breaks apart the cycles of destruction, not just for himself but also for us, thereby offering us new ways of living together.

What I also see as striking in Christ is that he does not use forgiveness to change someone's behavior, or demonstrate how he or she is wrong, or even to invite him or her to repentance. Rather, Christ's goal is to restore a damaged relationship and to draw that person or persons back into community. Like what he did with Peter two sermons ago when they had their little chat at the beach about loving Christ and taking care of the flock.

Jesus invites us to love each other enough to speak not just *to* but also *with* each other, holding each other accountable through vulnerability rather than by force. After all, it takes guts to talk to someone you feel is in the wrong without judging them, putting them down, or taking responsibility for their actions. And it takes guts to listen when someone else tries to do the same thing for you. In this way of relating, the key is to put being in relationship above being right, and to take incredibly seriously how much God wants us all to be in good relationship with each other and with God. God cares –

really cares – about how we treat each other and are treated in turn. God loves us enough to help us better love each other.

Jesus' whole purpose was to show us how much God loves us, and that this love is reflected in how we relate to each other. Jesus could not stand people living on the outside of his circle of love. He even gave his life to make this love known to us. Christ teaches that we cannot get close to God, cannot partake in God's gift of grace and love until we implement the continuous practice of forgiveness, until we make it a way of life.

Just to be clear: Forgiveness is not forgetting. One cannot forgive that which is forgotten. Forgiveness is not about becoming a doormat and relishing the role of victim. And forgiveness does not exonerate the perpetrator. It is not the acceptance of the status quo – especially when it is abusive. It is not automatic reconciliation.

Forgiveness is a chance, a possibility toward a new future, a way through the hurt and pain that can lead to resurrection and new life. It is the first step to rebuilding trust and giving any relationship another chance.

Today is Mother's Day. While many people and particularly **Hallmark** love this day of celebrating mothers and grandmothers and caregivers, of celebrating all those who have nourished our souls and wiped chocolate off our cheeks – which we should, it is a hard day for many others for a variety of reason. Some might feel their mother's physical absence because they have passed on; some might be estranged from their mother, or have had a difficult relationship with her for as long as they can remember. Some have been denied motherhood or lost a child, and this day just amplifies that loss. For some there is too much brokenness and too many tattered relationships to make this a happy day. I felt like I needed to say that not to ruin anyone's day, but to acknowledge that this, like any other holiday comes with lots of emotions, has a challenging side to it.

The need for forgiveness is ever present. Like in all our relationships, forgiveness is key to either holding us together or releasing/relieving us. Forgiveness can release us from the guilt of how we

might feel. Forgiveness can be the most important gift we give ourselves because if we do, we don't allow ourselves to be defined by our past or by situations that seem to keep us stuck or hold us back from living life abundantly. We might not have the power to change the past, but we have all the power to live intentionally into a brighter, better future through the practice of forgiveness.

And of course, as Christians we can also turn to Christ, the perfecter of forgiveness, and envision what he would have us do. I believe that when he gave us the world's most famous prayer that says "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" he is really saying to us that forgiveness is what this life is all about and once we realize that we are forgiven through the grace and love of God, it becomes easier to forgive others. Amen

**Sources:**

Randy Pausch, the Last Lecture

Dorothy Bass et al, Practicing our Faith

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