

“The Four Things That Matter Most: Forgive Me”
Matthew 5:21-26

Through his work with people at the time of their death, Dr. Ira Byock learned about the importance of relationships in life and of saying four things to our loved ones (screen): 1. Forgive me 2. I forgive you 3. Thank You and 4. I love you. Our words matter because they could bring healing and transformation. We cannot assume that our loved ones know what we are thinking or that we have resolved our issues with them. Our ability to make these statements in life to our loved ones can bring a deeper level of connection, vulnerability, and love. In his book *The Four Things that Matter Most* (image of book on screen), Dr. Byock writes that speaking these statements helps us complete our relationships, (screen), “It is a quirk of our language that the word *complete* implies finished or over, but a relationship can be complete without ending. Conversely, a relationship may end, but remain incomplete. The word *complete*, for instance, is whole and never-ending. We are complete in our relationships when we feel reconciled, whole, and at peace. People say they feel complete when, if they were to die tomorrow, they’d have no regrets - they would feel they had left nothing undone...or unsaid.”

And so today, we will focus on asking for forgiveness. Why do we need to say this? The simple answer is that we are not perfect. We make mistakes, sometimes intentionally while other times unintentionally!!! We sometimes hurt others and ourselves and those kinds of mistakes and hurts stay with us. They block our ability to connect with ourselves and with others. We end up carrying a lot of guilt and sometimes anger. One extreme example of such pain comes from the story of a woman by the name of Kelly Connor, who was not at liberty to talk about what she did, and it blocked her whole being from feeling free. When Kelly was 17, she was driving herself to work in the family car from her home in Perth, Australia. (First service) Here is a clip of Kelly telling a part of her story:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ_qMAtwTTY.

(second service) “That morning my dad was due to drive me to my job at the telephone exchange but decided at the last minute to have a lie-in, so I drove myself instead. As I climbed a steep hill, I saw a taxi waiting to pull out on the right and – concerned he’d pull out in front of me – I kept my eyes firmly fixed on him. At the brow of the hill I kept my foot firmly on the accelerator but suddenly on the pedestrian crossing in front of me I saw an elderly woman. As I slammed on the brake she looked up in terror and tried to run – but we collided. In the silence which followed I could almost have convinced myself it hadn’t happened. But, shaking uncontrollably, I managed to get out of the car and drape a blanket over the woman. That’s as much as the efficient part of me could manage. Very quickly after that the police and ambulance arrived. At the police station the officer gently guided me to say I’d been driving at a legal 35mph rather than the 45mph I’d really been doing. It was the policeman’s way of protecting me and it was the first time I experienced someone forgiving me. But it took me a long time to see it that way – for many years I wished I’d been imprisoned. I was informed later that morning that Margaret Healey had died in the hospital. At that moment I experienced myself in

another dimension of time and space – a sense of total alienation from the rest of the world. That feeling stayed with me for years. Two weeks later I came home to find Margaret Healey's brother talking to my parents. He told me that he wanted me to know that neither he, nor his family blamed me, and nor – he was sure – would Margaret. Deeply generous as I knew this to be, I wasn't in a position to accept his forgiveness. I didn't feel I deserved it. In fact, it just made things worse because I knew I'd given a false statement to the police. The guilt was so bad that four years later I went back to the police station to confess that I'd lied about the speed I was driving, but the senior police officer I spoke to refused to take my statement. 'Putting you in jail would turn a disaster into a tragedy' he said. My family very quickly fractured. The accident happened on my sister's 12th birthday, thus tainting her special day forever. My mother's way of dealing with it was to lay down the edict that we would never talk about it, and my father felt a terrible guilt for not having driven me on that day. Four months later my parents' marriage collapsed and shortly after that my father vanished. We never heard from him again until we were informed of his death ten years later. For nearly two decades I didn't speak about the accident at all. At one point I was so convinced I didn't have the right to continue living, I tried to commit suicide. I avoided relationships and although I ventured into marriage I left when my daughter was two, taking her with me. But it was the birth of Meegan which made me want to live again... In 2001 I was asked to write a book about my experience. Going public terrified me but I knew I had to do it to help others who were traumatized by the guilt of causing a death."

While most of us don't cause such deep suffering, we all have times when we say or do something that hurts others. Sometimes we even hurt others by things we leave undone: kindness withheld, affirmations not given, or duties neglected! Jesus recognized the importance of asking for forgiveness as a path to deeper prayer. (Read Matthew 5:21-26) In the teachings of Jesus found in Matthew 5, a theme emerges. Jesus affirmed the teachings of the Jewish faith by helping his followers get to the heart of the matter. Jesus was not interested in just changing the symptoms of the problem. He was interested in dealing with the root causes of our human struggles. The part we are focusing on has to do with unresolved anger and hurt. Jesus knew that violence does not begin with murder. It begins with our negative and angry thoughts about others. In the Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the word Jesus uses for anger is *orgizomenos*. It is a present participle which means it is an action that is continuing to take place. Jesus is not denouncing anger in general. He is talking about a specific kind of anger, the anger that is a continual state of being. He is talking about holding grudges and stewing in our angry feelings. Often times this scripture is misused to say that Jesus taught that we should never be angry. This kind of interpretation misses the point that Jesus was trying to make. Anger is part of life and could lead us to do good in the world. However, unresolved anger can lead us into violent thoughts, words and even actions. So Jesus invites the listeners to be proactive about seeking reconciliation. Even as one is doing their religious duty of bringing their offerings to God, one has to leave that duty and get their affairs in order before being truly able to pray and to be present to God. An open heart to God comes from our ability to resolve and complete our relationships. Not asking for forgiveness creates barriers for us and not

just with the people we have hurt, but also with our ability to feel whole and open to others. Asking for forgiveness is not about earning God's love or assuaging God's wrath against us. It is about releasing the power of anger and hate in our lives. It is important to note that the couple of references which Jesus uses for hell in verses 22 and 29 were not references to a spiritual place of eternal damnation as many would assume. This kind of understanding came later. These references were to a specific place outside of the City of Jerusalem. The Greek word here for hell is *Gehenna* which is a geographic place that was called "The Valley of Hinnom." This was the trash dump for the city of Jerusalem where fire burned all night and day to consume trash. Also, in earlier times the Valley of Hinnom was a place of worship of other nations. Hundreds of years before Jesus, and a long time before it was a trash dump, it was the cultic center for worshipping the god Molech. People would travel from near and far to come and worship Molech and make sacrifices to him. And the main sacrifice that was given to this god was children. The Valley of Hinnom was a place where bad things happened whether it was garbage burning or the sacrifice of children. This helps us understand that Jesus was using everyday images to help people connect their negative thoughts with the darkness and evil of Gehenna/The Valley of Hinnom.

How do we ask for forgiveness in real life? How do we ask for forgiveness in genuine ways in a culture that makes admitting our mistakes a weakness? How do we seek true reconciliation without being guilt ridden? We teach our children to say sorry when they hurt someone, but we often don't teach them to really lean into the process of asking for forgiveness. When we lived in Oregon, my daughter had a friend who would often say mean things to her. When the mom asked her daughter to apologize, the daughter would often say a quick and angry "sorry" that made my daughter even more upset. It was interesting to observe the conversation between the two girls. One was wanting to end the matter quickly, while the other wanted to have a full-fledged conversation about the issue at hand and the hurt that was caused. Asking for forgiveness is not easy and takes some intentional practice and some letting go of our egos.

In their book *The Book of Forgiving*, Desmond and Mpho Tutu have a Fourfold process (screen for the following steps)

1. Admitting the Wrong: The first step can be difficult. It is not easy to admit our wrongs. But it must be done... Admitting the wrong is how we begin to take responsibility for hurting another human being...In admitting what we have done, we must do so without any expectations about the response we may get...We must be willing to answer any and all the questions the victim has about what we've done. We must be careful not to self-justify or excuse our actions in any way. (note of caution: if there are legal consequences to consider, you may wish to consult counsel before admitting the wrong.)
2. Witnessing the Anguish and Apologizing: It is hard to witness the harm we have caused and to apologize...When we witness the anguish we have caused another, we help that person heal, and we help the relationship heal...Victims need to feel they are being heard and affirmed. The best way to do this is to not

argue the fact of their stories or the ways they are hurting...When people are hurting, they cannot be cross-examined out of their pain.

3. Asking for Forgiveness: We often wonder if it is selfish to ask for forgiveness. Are we asking to be let off the hook, to not pay our debts to society, or to not be held accountable for our actions? It is not selfish to ask for forgiveness, and in truth it is the highest form of accountability...We ask for forgiveness because none of us can live in the past...A big part of asking for forgiveness is making amends, and what this consists of depends in part on what the victim needs from you in order to forgive.
4. Renewing or Releasing the Relationship: Often our relationship can grow stronger through the process of admitting a wrong and asking for forgiveness...We seek restoration and renewal, and if that is not possible, we release the relationship. Just as renewing the relationship is not forgetting, releasing the relationship is not losing...Releasing means moving into the future free of the past.

What are some behaviors that get in the way of the process of asking for forgiveness? Here is a list (screen and bulletin): Getting defensive, rationalizing why you hurt the other person, justifying your behavior, demanding that the other person forgive you because you apologized, not allowing the other person a chance to share their pain, talking to others about the issue so they would put pressure on the person to accept your apology, minimizing the hurt feelings of the other, and giving gifts or doing nice things as a way to avoid talking about the pain caused.

I would like to end with words from Mr. Rogers about his willingness to ask for forgiveness. Mr. Rogers often chose his words very carefully and believed in the importance of our words to convey love. Here is a clip from Mr. Rogers:

<https://vimeo.com/86542792>

Here are some words from Desmond Tutu about the power of asking for forgiveness: "There is something magical about saying 'I am sorry.' There is healing in the very utterance. Who among us has not had to say these words and who among us has not wished to hear them? 'I am sorry' can be a bridge between nations, spouses, friends, and enemies. A whole world can be built on the very foundation laid out in these three simple words: 'I am sorry.'" May we have the courage and blessing of God to say these words both to loved ones and to enemies whenever we offend or hurt. Amen.