

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 14 & 15, 2012
John Crosby with Heather Larson
You & Me: Forgiveness
Colossians 3:12-15**

Would you please take out the Bibles that you brought with you or the Bibles in the pews and turn with me to Colossians, chapter 3? It's found toward the end of the Bible on page 1,756. A couple of years ago we did a series called 100 Stories in God's Big Story, and I wish so much that this one had been in it. It is a great passage. We are going to start at verse 12. In probably three-quarters of the weddings I do, this is the passage I read to the new couple. If it is not already underlined in your Bible, if you would, please, underline it. It says,

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people....

Here I always turn to the couple and say, "I believe God chose you for each other."

...holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Last week I started out by saying, "Christ is risen," and you replied, "He is risen indeed." That was appropriate for Easter, but I said when Christians usually meet, they should say to one another, "The Lord be with you," and you would say, "And also with you." There is something about God's presence being among us when we are in relationship, in community. That is why this passage is so important. God is trying to show us how to live together in different ways from how we lived before. Unfortunately, whether we are in church or not, these relationships seem to get broken or hurt or strained. What do we do when things go wrong? Each of you, every single one of you I bet, if I gave you more than 30 seconds, could think of someone with whom your relationship is strained or broken. They have hurt you. You have hurt them. You misunderstand each other. You don't like each other. You need forgive one another, so let's do that. Let's just take a second and do that. If God were to say something to you about that relationship, who would that be? I am up to about five already so this is not theoretical.

But it is also the truth that, frankly, you have heard Rich and me talk about forgiveness a lot over the years. We thought it would be helpful to have someone with a different voice come and talk with us this morning. Heather Larson is a professional, not a professional forgiver but a professional in terms of relationships. She is a counselor, a family therapist, and with her husband, she has been a teacher here and in other settings in the area of relationships overall, but especially premarital. She is a mom with three kids, Adam and Kate and Anna. When I thought of talking about forgiveness, I said, "Well, let's ask somebody who helps people enrich those most intimate of relationships that we have whether we are married or not."

John Crosby: Heather, let me just ask you to start out this way. WHEN DO I NEED TO FORGIVE? I am not sure if I have to forgive when they cut me off in traffic. I am pretty sure forgiveness is involved if they kill my dog right in front of me. That is the spectrum. How do I know when I need to forgive somebody?

Heather Larson: Forgiveness is such a huge, huge topic. I am excited to talk about what that looks like in our everyday relationships. Each of us has this emotional trigger inside of us that when something has happened, when an expectation, a desire, or a need has not been met, when we don't get something we think we deserve, that there is a sense of hurt or disappointment. But for most of us, we just get angry. **The distance between the reality of what actually happened and the expectation brings about an emotional response.** It is important to stop and ask ourselves, am I angry about the right thing for the right reason? Am I angry in the right way?

I remember experiencing this anger in my relationship with my husband Peter in our first week of marriage. We were newlyweds. In fact, we had been married just one week. This is going back a long time here. It was new in our marriage. We were living out in LA. Peter was a grad student and I was a schoolteacher at the time. I had a 20-minute commute home from work, and it was the first Friday of our marriage. Peter didn't have classes on Fridays, so I was driving home from work thinking, I bet he has spent the day thinking about me and thinking about what he can do for me tonight. I bet he has planned a lovely, romantic dinner. I bet he has gone grocery shopping. I bet he has even set the table with my new dishes. I'll come home, and there will be fresh flowers on the table and maybe a bottle of wine chilling in the refrigerator. So you can see the expectations are way up *here*.

John: Every guy in this room, your hands are sweating, right?

Heather. So I get home and there is a note on the table. There is no dinner. The note says, "Golfing with Clint." I was angry. I was like, oh, my word! What did I just get into? I just married this guy. I heard that romance kind of dies, but this quickly? I mean, we are one. Where are you? You are golfing with Clint! But fortunately I asked myself, am I angry about the right thing for the right reason in the right way? And I quickly realized, no, I am not. He had no idea that that was my expectation so, praise God that golf takes a really long time. When Peter got home two hours later, I was able to laugh and say, "You know, you were in so much trouble two hours ago." Forgiveness! We just need to be aware of that emotional trigger inside of us.

Another way to answer **when we need to forgive is, daily or often.** Daily we are going to make mistakes and have misunderstandings. Daily there are going to be misperceptions. We are just a group of sinners living together. We need to forgive daily in order to create an environment where grace and truth are present, where authentic relationships are able to grow. The reason is, anger never gets buried dead. You have heard the expression, don't let the sun go down on your anger. The reason is, anger is never buried dead. It is always buried alive. If we don't work through our anger and hurts, they will pile up and seep out in other ways like bitterness or resentment or even sarcasm. A lot of times sarcasm is just thinly veiled anger.

The third point to remember about **when to forgive is, readily.** We can ask ourselves, how would I like God to respond to me when I come to Him for forgiveness? We have a God who is gracious. He extends unconditional grace and forgiveness when it isn't deserved, earned, or

sometimes even asked for. God doesn't put forgiveness on a timeline or attach conditions to it. We need to be able to forgive readily in relationships with each other as well.

John: So the idea is that we are supposed to forgive daily and readily. That makes good sense. And I love the line that anger never gets buried dead. It is always alive and digging its way to the surface. It reminds us that not forgiving somebody, being angry, is toxic. It is like eating rat poison, expecting the other person to die. That is what happens. So, Heather, I want to forgive, but sometimes I am not sure WHAT FORGIVENESS IS. Sometimes it helps to know what forgiveness is not. What are some of the nots? What is *not* forgiveness? What are myths about forgiveness?

Heather: There are a lot of misperceptions of what forgiveness is, and it is good to break those down. First of all, forgiveness is **not easy**. I love the fact that we are studying forgiveness today, right after the series on spiritual disciplines because just like in the spiritual disciplines, we have to do our part to allow God to do His work in us. Forgiveness is something we cannot do on our own. We cannot do it by ourselves.

Forgiveness is **not natural**. It is hard. On our own, we want our own way all of the time. We want justice. We want pay back, maybe even revenge, but because we have been forgiven, we can forgive others. In fact, we really are able to forgive only to the extent that we feel forgiven. You may have heard this around the idea of love. We can love to the extent that we feel loved. The same is true for forgiveness. Those who are prideful and feel like they are pretty darn good and that they don't need a lot of forgiveness tend to have a harder time extending forgiveness to others.

Another misconception is that those who forgive are door mats inviting in more abuse. They just let everybody walk all over them, but forgiveness is **not weak**. It really isn't. Forgiveness actually comes from a place of strength. It restores power to the person who previously may have felt like the victim. It takes power to set up boundaries and put together a sense of control for yourself.

One misconception that keeps people from forgiveness is the idea that forgiveness will always end in reconciliation. It **does not always end in reconciliation**. It is true that the goal of forgiveness is to restore the relationship, but that relationship will always be different after you have worked through forgiveness. There may be new boundaries set or an opportunity for trust to be rebuilt. The relationship will be different. It may even be closer whether the relationship is with a teenager or between a couple who have worked through a tough issue and restored a relationship.

John: But sometimes it doesn't work in that the other person doesn't change. It is not a one-time offense. Do you have any examples where forgiveness happens on one side, but the other person doesn't reciprocate?

Heather: Forgiveness is **not a one-time event**. We often think, well, I've forgiven them so now I'm done, but the next time you see that person, the angry feelings come back. Forgiveness is not contingent upon the other person changing or upon the other person not repeating the behavior. In order to maintain relationships, forgiveness and love are a choice you have to make over and over again. This is especially true in difficult relationships. Maybe you know a difficult person. Perhaps it is a parent, a sibling, an in-law, a neighbor, or a colleague.

I had a client I'll just call Sara who came to me because she had a really difficult relationship with her mom. Sara grew up feeling that love was always contingent upon her doing well in everything. Her mom often criticized and belittled her. Her mom was not interested in going through the process of healing the relationship but through therapy, Sara was able to work through the steps of forgiveness. She was able to see that her mom had done the best she could with what she had. She decided she wanted to show her mom love and continue a relationship with her. She had to set up boundaries to be sure she wouldn't continue to get hurt. She knew she wanted this relationship for herself and her kids and decided to continue to work through forgiveness even if her mom didn't change.

John: All of us have relationships that are broken and call for forgiveness. As a matter of fact, we are commanded to forgive. Remember the passage here. It says,

¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another....

Forgiving one another is different from emotion, I don't feel like it. Forgiving one another is a commandment.

...if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

So we need to decide, WHAT IS FORGIVENESS? As I thought through it, I wrote this down. I think that forgiveness is **a decision that you make over and over. It is a decision to set aside past grievances, to wipe the slate clean** rather than allow those feelings to contaminate our present and our future. It doesn't mean to overlook what happened or excuse what happened, but it means choosing not to hold the past against the way we see the other person. It is theological. It is theoretical. So you understand it, but how do you do it? That is why I wanted Heather here as a counselor to help us with the question, HOW DO I FORGIVE?

Heather: I love our Scripture today. Right here in Paul's letter to the Colossians God gives us these practical steps on how to forgive. I think it is important to see how we can apply these steps in our relationships. I want to share a story about a time I worked through forgiveness with my daughter Kate. She has given me permission to share this story with you.

As John said, I have three kids. Kate is my middle child, 9 years old. She is a loving, friendly fourth grader. She has more friends than I know what to do with, sometimes more than she does. She is really creative but she is not a detail person. To set the scene, it is morning. The children are getting ready for school. I am getting ready for work and the day ahead. We have finished breakfast. I have the lunches set aside. I have done the dishes, and it is time for me to take Adam and Anna to school. Kate is aware that she is expected to finish the morning routine while I am gone so that she can be ready for the bus. She knows the drill. She has to brush her teeth, brush her hair, make her bed, PJs picked up, pack her lunch, pack her backpack. I return home and walk in the door and don't see Kate. It is 5 minutes before the bus is to come. I go downstairs and find Kate in the craft room making a beautiful card to give to her friend Lizzie on the bus. I can see that nothing on her list of things to do has been accomplished so here we have expectations, and here is reality.

Unfortunately we are never more at risk to sin than when anger is high. Here is my confession to you. I did not respond with patience, kindness, and gentleness. There were no fruits of the Spirit

present. Did I get angry for the right reasons? Yes, I had room for anger. She has not performed her responsibilities. I need to teach my child a lesson. Did I get angry in the right way? I did not get angry in the right way. I yelled. "What are you thinking? You are going to miss your bus," and her full name is out there. She is in trouble. "Get going. I can't believe every morning I have to yell at you before you get moving." I can see her shoulders slump as she goes up the stairs to get her teeth brushed and her hair brushed. I storm off to the kitchen to pack her lunch and even though the anger is burning, I feel awful! I didn't want this to be my message to Kate for the day. As I packed her lunch, I prayed for God to help me parent and show Kate love. "Lord, help me be the mom that she needs me to be. I am sorry. Fill me with patience. Fill me with the fruit of Your Spirit. I can't do this on my own. Give me compassion. Give me grace." That is the first step in forgiveness from our Scripture today. **Forgive as the Lord forgives you.** We cannot do this on our own. We need to stop and pray that God will help us carry out the next steps of forgiveness.

The next thing I did was take a deep breath and **clothe myself in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.** In therapy world, we talk about this as empathy or understanding the other person. I had to separate who Kate is, a loving, creative girl, from what she did, or in this case did not do. I took time to view her as an object of God's love and attribute worth to her. She is God's chosen child. God loves her. God lives in her heart, so it is about seeing her as worthy, an object of God's love.

The next step is to **put on love.** Choosing love with a spouse or one of those difficult people we talked about earlier can be really hard. With Kate when she came back in the kitchen, it was easy for me to put on an attitude of love. I love her. She is my child.

But there may be some difficult people in our lives that we have to forgive over and over again. With those difficult people, it is important that we have a loving heart before we go to that next step which is to **bear with one another.** To bear with one another is the hard work of reviewing the past, admitting I was wrong to have yelled at her, and using such hurtful, untrue words. "Kate," I said, "Will you forgive me?" I listened as she readily confessed that she should have completed her list of morning chores before she started her card. "Mom, I'm so sorry. I know I should have done my list before I went and made that card for Lizzie."

Listening to that confession is so important. It is so important that you hear where it is that the other person is coming from so that you can take that final step of **forgiving each another** and restoring the relationship. Forgiveness opens us up to a deeper relationship in the future. Kate and I hugged each other, prayed together, and I sent her off on the bus to have a great day.

John: After the sermon last night, as I walked out, one of the people said, "This is terrible. I hear all these talks about forgiveness, but I never knew how and so that was my excuse." She said, "Now I know how or at least I have a place to start." It is my prayer that that has happened to you this morning, that God has messed with you. For some of you, that brings freedom, knowing that you can be forgiven. For others of you, it rings business. God has business for you to do as people of God, as God's dearly beloved chosen people. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, You know all about forgiveness, what it is like to not be forgiven when you have done nothing wrong, what it is like to have to forgive when the other person doesn't even acknowledge they have done anything wrong. There are people in this room, Lord

Jesus, who have been hurt very badly, who have been abused. We don't want to give them the additional burden of having to say, "I'm sorry for you abusing me." We don't want that but instead, Lord, we ask that they will be free of the toxic hatred, the fear of what has been done to them or what we have done in the past, little or big. I pray, Lord, right now that You will bring to our minds the name of one person and the thought of one step that we can take to becoming forgiving people marked by reconciliation. One person, one step. And then, Lord, that You right now would remind us how we are forgiven. Love us Lord, and remind us that You will never, ever let us go. Bless us with that kind of grace so that we can share it with others. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost we pray. Amen.

Resources:

Choosing the Gift of Forgiveness: How to Overcome Hurts and Brokenness by David G. Benner and Robert W. Harvey

The Freedom of Forgiveness by David Augsburger

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.