

“The Forgiveness of Sins.”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

The Apostles Creed Series

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35 “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”; Matthew 6:12

given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on

March 26, 2006

<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

We are in the process of establishing a custom to make the Sunday of the Annual Women's Retreat a little more **Manly**.

Today I am preaching on the “forgiveness of sins” which, if you read the best seller *Manliness* by Harvey Mansfield, is something real manly men don't do. Dick Cheney is mentioned prominently in the book, and he lives by the adage: Never admit a mistake—take no prisoners. Never compromise. It has worked for him-- his approval rate is 18%, which seems to me—way too high—and as someone remarked in the Paper Tigers—well, he did shoot a lawyer - otherwise it would be in the single digits!

The trend toward macho, take no prisoners manliness has found itself close to the hearts of all American men—in the design of our cars and trucks. There is a recent Wall Street Journal article on this very topic - “**Why Cars Got Angry.**”

It was news to me, but car makers have long talked about the “face” of a car—**headlights** for eyes, **grille** for a mouth and **bumper** as jaws. And auto designers say the difference between a hit and a flop may come down to a vehicle's face. Car makers used to strive for an **inviting face**, but lately they are pushing an edgier, more angry and at times even sinister look.

The **Hyundai Talus** features a gaping grill---big teeth about to devour pedestrians or political opponents.

Dennis Evans has found us an example of a car with an even more menacing face. (on the screen)

Why the anger? Some of it relates to **road rage**. A menacing look serves as an **equalizer**—menacing front ends appeal to drivers threatened by oversized SUV's --or gigantic trucks. The sinister face presents a **corrective rudeness** ---manly drivers need their space---without a giant SUV or truck they need something that menacingly says “**get out of my way or else!**”

This also suggests that **looks are more important than ever in cars**. In the days of routine cosmetic surgery in women—men are saying, “you judge cars by the grill and headlights.”

Another interesting thing---**that cars, like dogs, tend to resemble their owners**.

We have a cute 13-year-old Pomeranian. She can't hear---but she thinks she is tougher then she is.

There are a lot of cars now that look like *they* are growling at you.

Some car companies are keeping with the friendly look. Two are Mini-Cooper and Honda.

But Toyota in their 2007 line is **going mean and more aggressive**.

The 2007 Camry will have headlights and fenders that imply a leer---**hoping to appeal** to male drivers.

The successful release of the **new Mustang** is owed to its radically re- designed face. Ford made changes after talking to some real men—**The Oklahoma City Dead Horse Mustang Club** told Ford engineers “it wasn't mean enough.” So they changed the headlights—adding what looks like a **sinister eyelid**---which frankly says, **“I will bite your head off. Cross me and I don't get mad, I get even.”**

Now that I have got your minds going and your testosterone flowing---
This scripture lesson deals with forgiveness and justice.

The alarming rise of identity theft frauds has caused a lot of people to become more security conscious. How many of you own a shredder? The purchase of shredders for home use has boomed. Get them at Wal-Mart. Cheap. My sister runs every piece of personal mail with her name or any other identifying personal information through the shredder before sending it out with the trash. Shredders protect your pocketbook and your reputation.

A shredder is a simple yet highly efficient device. It shreds any sheet of paper fed into it into narrow, curling ribbons that immediately coil into a mass of what looks like tangled spaghetti. The paper and whatever information was on it is **forever gone**.

Today's gospel lesson is about **shredding the record of human misdeeds**. It is about doing it in a **“big way”** in order to eliminate an unfathomable debt. Jesus is telling his most well known disciple Peter that he must be willing to forgive **“seventy times seven.”**

In other words, as many times as forgiveness is sought, it must be given. As many sins as there are for men and women to commit, there must be forgiveness.

To make the message even more crystal clear—Jesus tells a story of a slave who owed the staggering debt of 10,000 talents. In Palestine that is an incredible amount—greater than the total yearly collection of taxes by the Romans. Before he would be thrown into debtor's prison he fell on his knees begging the King to give him **time to repay the debt**. This is laughable—repayment would be impossible. Yet, the King forgave the whole debt and set him free.

But instead of passing it on, the servant begins to threaten and squeeze the minuscule debt out of one who owes him. The forgiven servant is merciless and has his debtor thrown into prison. When the king hears of this self-righteous, unforgiving behavior, he is enraged. The first servant's unbelievably staggering debt is reinstated and he is thrown into prison for the rest of his life.

Admittedly this is a **hard-edged message to hear**. But then as now, it needs to be heard. **Those who can't find in their own hearts to forgive will themselves remain unforgiven—with dire life suffocating consequences.**

The process of asking for forgiveness and receiving a declaration of God's mercy is firmly embedded in our Sunday liturgy. We have a prayer of general confession, then a time of silent confession followed by a declaration of God's forgiveness.

In declaring God's pardon preachers often use the same words used 20 centuries ago *“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* The priest would then announce that our sins are forgiven and the people would then celebrate having the burden of sin removed by **sharing the peace** that comes with being freed from the burden of our misdeeds.

In the early church it was believed that the **act of Baptism washed away all the sins one had previously committed**. It was then expected—perhaps naively—that the new believers would not commit any more serious sins. To be forgiven for new sins, especially the serious sins—like idolatry, or adultery---required an **elaborate process**. There were hearings, meetings with church leaders and the confessor had to present evidence of a change in heart and convincing testimony that the sin would not be repeated. There were elaborate RESTORATION rituals.

In the case of renouncing faith in front of a tribunal during brutal persecution by Nero—there were many who refused to allow them back into the church. Adultery was also considered an unpardonable sin.

The issue arose in the early Church—how were the lapsed allowed back in the church? Were all sins forgivable? Who forgave them?

“I believe in the forgiveness of sin,” was included in the Apostles' Creed to end the argument. Yes, we believe that the sins people commit after their baptism—**are** forgivable.

In an earlier part of Matthew 18, Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples that they have the authority to both forgive and refuse to forgive sins. Jesus talks about forgiveness as the way of restoring little ones to faith.

A logical question was the one Peter asked –well, how many chances should we give people? Seven times.

No—not seven times but **seventy times seven**.

The question of how often we ought to forgive has **dogged the church for centuries**.

What it boils down to is this:

- Isn't Christian forgiveness sometimes used as a way to avoid or deny honestly resolving conflict?
- Can't you forgive so quickly and easily so as to demand the gift of forgiveness?
- Isn't it possible to forgive someone over and over and over in a manner that literally reinforces and encourages them to continue in hurtful, crazy, irresponsible and destructive ways?

Jesus doesn't buy this tough love answer. When forgiveness is enumerated, forgiveness is eliminated. True forgiveness can only be offered endlessly and infinitely. Keeping score of offenses against us, and keeping tracks of wrongs is a contradiction in terms of forgiving from the heart.

It goes deeper. Christ is telling Peter—and indirectly you and I , that we are called to **forgive for our own sakes as much as for the sake of the other party**. Because in forgiving, the mercy of God takes root and we live that mercy out and **spread the peace** that comes from almighty God.

When I returned from vacation last Sunday—there were bills I had forgotten to pay—incurring a couple of late fees –I NEVER PAY LATE FEES AND NEVER CARRY A CREDIT CARD BALANCE.

I was annoyed because I thought I had made the last tuition payment but miscounted----the account was out of money.

I was ornery and uncomfortable...my vacation had not been in the warm and sunny south—but in the cold and blustery north. I was angry at my wife for being soft on moaning relatives in her family - “we miss you” - that we didn't get any time to relax.

Why am I so ornery?

What reason do I have to complain?—they were also my mistakes. Half the time was spent with my sister and three of my kids.

The root is anger—related to **harboring some resentment at someone else.**

If you dig down far enough you will find that it is the failure to forgive even little things that drives resentment that can make our lives unbearable. If left unchecked—it can lead to dire relational difficulties: divorce and jealousy of friends and health problems all related to unwillingness to forgive.

Scott Peck began his mega-best seller, *The Road Less Traveled*, by stating that—“**life is difficult.**” He goes on to say that the road to spiritual and emotional health is hard. It takes courage to grow.

Peck says that **Forgiveness is hard.**

I can't remember who said it but it is very true.

“It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it has been discovered to be difficult and so not attempted.” Forgiveness is hard.

The Story of Jonah. The man who because he disobeyed God and ran away from the city God had sent him to evangelize—was swallowed by a large fish. God has asked Jonah to travel outside Israel to the land of his enemies and to preach mercy.

So after his ordeal in the fish, Jonah goes to the large city of Nineveh—which is present day Mosul in Iraq on the Tigris River. There he preaches . . . “change your evil ways or else God's judgment is coming.”

And amazingly they did. The whole city.

But instead of being happy that he had transformed an evil people, he was angry that God would not send fire down to destroy this city for he hated the people and wanted God to show his wrath.

God asks Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah thought so and he stewed by sitting outside the wall of the City under a bush to shade himself from the hot sun.

So God appointed a worm to be his prophet. The worm ate away the roots of the tree under which Jonah was seeking shelter from the hot sun. **This got Jonah very angry.**

“Jonah if you care about the bush, should I not care about the people of Nineveh and even its animals?” So deep was Jonah's hatred and resentment, that he would rather die than let God forgive the people of Nineveh.

Forgiveness is hard; and it poses a special threat to the righteous.

I remember being at a post 9/11 event. There were theological implications. Fear was rampant and anxiety was high. One middle-aged man got up and stated what many people in the room obviously

were thinking . . .

“those people that destroyed the towers . . .the Bible says I have to forgive them. But I am telling you, I just can't do it. What does this mean for me, since Jesus said we had to forgive others in order to be forgiven?”

Hindsight is 20/20. It is safe to say that anger—a lack of forgiveness---vindictiveness---led to a war that has cost us a trillion dollars.

We are deeply divided in this country---we have been handicapped for decades in the resources and political capital to deal with serious problems. There are Biblical implications in that they have pushed the consequences of that fateful decision back to our grandchildren and great grandchildren.

This is a harsh lesson: It does not present God in a favorable manner.

This parable is not of a king who gave the gift of forgiveness and then took it back; rather it is the story of a servant who does not participate in the forgiveness that is extended, and so hurts himself and his community.

God is giving him a life-changing gift—a clean slate. A free do over . . .The break of a lifetime. And he holds power over someone else who is indebted to him—the chance to share God's life changing gift of mercy---but he throws the opportunity away.

He does not share the spirit of the Father so he ends up **bringing judgment and pain** on his debtor and upon himself. The unforgiving servant imprisons himself.

The easiest way to know if you are in the presence of an evil spirit and an unclean heart is when you talk to someone who can tell you in incredible detail the injustices that someone else has done to them. Some can still tell them years after. After I listen to them for quite a while I just want to say---IF YOU WANT TO GET BETTER YOU HAVE GOT TO LET THAT STUFF GO.

Lack of forgiveness and the nasty spirit and pessimistic attitudes it can produce can imprison you for life. It is sad to say for some of the members in my churches that anger and resentment for past wrongs--hastened their death.

One remarkable attribute that was central to **Abraham Lincoln's** greatness of character was that he never assumed malice in the actions of any of his rivals or opponents. Even when malicious intent was evident—Lincoln would overlook it by appealing to the issues at hand and would respond by appealing to his opponents to achieve a common goal. He assumed the mean spirited remark was the result of a troubled spirit and by overlooking the slight he almost always elevated the behavior of his opponents and turned rivals into loyal friends.

He never returned pettiness for pettiness and didn't hold grudges.

Abe Lincoln could forgive seventy times seven.

There is a best seller on managing employees. *“There is a rule of thumb when criticizing. If you need to say something to someone, what you have to say ought to hurt you as much to say it as it will potentially hurt them; if it does, it's okay to say it. But if saying it will bring you just the slightest bit of pleasure to say it, just shut up.”*

Although Jesus' parables do not often come with an explanatory trailer, this one offers a parting shot. "So my heavenly father will also do to you." Jesus unflinchingly demands that each of us should live in the light of God's forgiveness that we have received for all our sins and shortcomings.

He warns that a lack of forgiveness on our part can lead to a hold on God's forgiveness extended our way.

You may not notice it but this is repeated each week in the Lord's Prayer, "if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

This is one of **my favorite stories**. It's the story of a father and a teenage son. Their relationship was strained and in the middle of a conflict, the son tore out of the house and ran away from home.

After waiting, the father went searching for the son. The father searched throughout the Spanish countryside, searched throughout the villages. But he couldn't find his son, Paco. Finally he entered Madrid, and as he wandered through the streets and alleyways, his despair grew deeper until he decided in his desperation to place an ad in the paper which read simply: **"Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father."**

The next day the father worked his way back to the square in front of the newspaper office and was astonished to see not just the son he hoped would be there but 800 Pacos, longing for forgiveness.

We are a people who believe in the forgiveness of sins. We live among people who have tasted God's boundless graciousness. We have been given new life. My prayer is that each one here—will have the strength and the courage to be revived by this gift. May each one of you leave this place reveling in our good fortune and erase in our hearts, the transgressions of the others we have not forgiven—and to receive the forgiveness of those we have sinned against.