

“The Spiritual Practice of Forgiveness”
Colossians 3:1-3;10-15
June 14, 2020

This Summer’s Film Festival is helping us explore Spiritual Practices. Last week we looked at the Spiritual Practice of being truthful with God, with yourself and with others. This week’s film, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” walks us into the Spiritual Practice of Forgiveness. The early Christian churches struggled to maintain their communities of faith. Church elders wrote letters to the faithful exhorting them to stay strong in Christ and to make Christ the center of all their spiritual and ritual practice. Hear what the Spirit is saying in the late first century in this passage from a church leader to the congregation in Colossae, the 3rd Chapter, beginning with the first verse:

So, if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides.

Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up and be alert to what is going on around Christ - that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.

Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life - even though invisible to spectators - is with Christ in God. He is your life.

Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete.

Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.

Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you.

And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness.

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

My parents had an interesting way of leading their four children to reconciliation when a wrong had occurred between them. There was no arbitration of who was right and who was at fault. There was no pleading of the case against the real offender, no finding of guilt and no public sentencing for the crime.

The central combatants were sent to their respective rooms and told they could come out only after each wrote a sincere letter of forgiveness to the other. Not just a sentence or two, mind you. A whole letter, complete with a date and Dear So-and-So, complete sentences, correct grammar and spelling, an ending that was at least “Sincerely” but better if it said, “Love,” and signed. The heart of the letter was scrutinized by one or both of our parents for content and sincerity. If it didn’t pass muster, back the author went for a re-write. By the time the project was finished, the alleged offense was long forgotten, and all was forgiven, at least on the surface.

Needless to say, I became a very adept writer during the formative hours I spent in my room as a child.

Today during Time With the Children, I showed us all the story of “Joseph Forgives His Brothers.” There are many Bible stories of God forgiving the people their wrongs, starting with Adam and Eve and continuing all through the First Testament. But there are very few Bible stories of people forgiving each other, Joseph being the most familiar. There is a later one where King David forgives Saul for wanting to kill him, but sadly in our sacred book, the theme of vengeance is actually much more common than forgiveness!

The New Testament is not much better. Jesus forgives his executioners and Stephen forgives those who will stone him to death. Nice, huh? Even I was not *that* mean to my brother and sisters.

I have often said that you can find every social and ethical topic you want in the Bible. But my research this week leads me to conclude that though there are many references to God being a forgiving God and that people of faith should ask God to forgive their wrongs, there are only a couple of stories in the scriptures about people forgiving those they personally know, like a sibling or a friend, and *no* stories to be found of children forgiving their parents-none. I wonder why not?

Is it a cultural gap that we are seeing, played out over generations and centuries of the religious story of our ancestors in antiquity?

Or is forgiveness a modern or postmodern ethic that had no relevance in the ancient world, but now for some reason has become important in our post-New Testament lives? I wonder.

The first mention of Forgiveness as a Spiritual Practice in the New Testament appears in Matthew's Gospel in the 6th chapter. Jesus teaches his disciples in the Lord's Prayer that God forgives our wrongs as we should forgive others their wrongs against us.

The disciples stew on this for a few chapters and then in Chapter 18, Peter asks Jesus, "Master, how *many times* do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Jesus replies, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven." He follows this with a parable about a king's servant who refuses to forgive a measly 10-dollar debt owed him by a fellow servant even though he had been shown mercy by the king to whom he owed a debt of a hundred *thousand* dollars. The one who refuses to forgive is shown no mercy by the king and is threatened that God will treat him likewise.

Fast forward to the early Christian churches, including the one at Colossae. On the map that I will now show you, Colossae was located in what is now southern Turkey, near the settlements of Hierapolis and Laodicea. As they

neared the year 100 CE the Colossians were having trouble staying connected in the centrality of Christ, increasingly relying on pagan rituals and symbols.

In the Apostle Paul's name, an unknown church leader wrote a letter to the congregation, reminding them of their commitment as Christians to act with justice and compassion, showing mercy and granting forgiveness to others as Christ had decades earlier taught their predecessors in faith. The author writes:

Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

“Wear love, your basic, all-purpose garment.” This brings me to Mr. Rogers and our film for this weekend, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.” I hope you enjoyed watching this film, if you did, but more than that, I hope it made you cry. I hope in these days of Extreme Numbness that it made you *feel* The Spiritual Practice of Forgiveness.

The story is as much about healing the broken spirit of Lloyd Vogel as it is about Fred Rogers. Lloyd is unknown to the children’s television star until being assigned in 1998 to write a short puff piece about him for Esquire Magazine. He carries intense anger towards his father and grief for his mother, who died of cancer when he was quite young. He has subconsciously over a number of years taken his anger out on people he has investigated and reported on, his magazine pieces earning awards for their grit and unrelenting style.

At the end of her life, when his mother was in the hospital lying in agony and her two small children needed him the most, his father leaves all of them and does not come back. Lloyd has never tried to forgive either of his parents, instead harboring hatred and unresolved loss deep in his heart. Now a first-time

father himself, he has not bonded to his own son and neither he nor his wife can figure out why not.

It is eerie how Mr. Rogers zeroes in on Lloyd's spiritual and physical pain, gently but doggedly pulling out of his interviewer the story of his brokenness. Reviewer Pete Hammond said more than a year ago when it came out that "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" is "the movie we need right now." This statement could not be truer. Mr. Rogers wears love as his all-purpose garment. How does anybody do that, especially today when there is so much raw anger and hatred readily on display everywhere we turn?

One day on his show Mr. Rogers shows a picture of Lloyd Vogel with a beat-up face. He tells the children in television land that his new friend is, "having a hard time forgiving the person who has hurt him." He instructs the audience further: "Forgiveness is a decision we make to release a person from the feelings of anger we have towards them."

Mr. Rogers then looks right into the camera and teaches us, all of us, "Have you ever felt the way Lloyd does--so angry you want to hurt someone or yourself? There's always something you can do with the mad you feel."

The Gospel According to Fred Rogers. Over the next days and weeks, Mr. Rogers leads Lloyd on a journey of remembering, walking alongside him and supporting him as he falters in the trauma of his childhood. When Lloyd's mother appears to him in a dream and tells him, "I know you think you're doing this for me—hanging onto this anger—but I don't need it," Mr. Rogers is there to re-frame the dream as his mother's invitation to forgive his father. When his father, now dying, laments, "It's not fair—I'm just now starting to figure out how to live my life!" Mr. Rogers is there inviting Lloyd into a new vision of how life can look lived without the burden of hate. He encourages forgiveness towards Lloyd's father, saying,

Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.

Fred Rogers sounds himself unflawed, a suggestion that makes Joanne, his wife of 50 years, laugh. "I don't like that word, 'saint,' she says. "It makes is sound unattainable and Rog was not like that. He had a temper!"

Whether he was or was not saintly, when he died in 2003 the world lost a prophet, a teacher, a healer, and a very human American Hero. He taught us to accept our neighbors and he taught us to speak about our feelings, especially our feelings of pain and anger. He used puppets to channel his own feelings as he talked to children about real subjects--tough subjects--in a gentle way that allowed them to own their feelings without shame.

Chris gave me a book of his some years ago. In, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*, I found this quote of his: One of my wise teachers, Dr. William F. Orr, told me, "There is only one thing evil cannot stand and that is forgiveness." I think this is so. Waiting for someone to repent their wrongs against you is folly and it robs your future. I think forgiveness is a channel through which God can heal us even when we can't let our own pain and anger go.

Humankind has been given the gift to be able to reform our relationships through forgiveness. Animals can't do this, but they don't hold grudges either. Nothing robs their future-they have no capacity to dwell on past hurts. They may learn defensive behavior based on past abuse, but they don't churn on their past and they always look for the next opportunity for love and reconciliation, even with the one who has harmed them.

We all have someone to forgive, perhaps someone buried deep in our past, someone that evil brings to our mind all too often, stirring the pot of woundedness, seeking brokenness as a fertile breeding ground for more pain and dissociation. God wants us to wear love as our basic, all-purpose garment. Given the new challenges we are facing in our world right now, a whole lot more of wearing the garment of love for ourselves and others would be a welcome change. Maybe if I'd had Mr. Rogers in front of me in my growing up years, I would have spent less time in my room writing letters of forgiveness just to get out of detention. I would have spent less nights awake churning my anger and brokenness, and a lot more time wearing the love of Christ as my all-purpose garment.

My wish for you today is that you embrace forgiveness, for by embracing it you diminish evil and give yourself a chance at a new life, one lived in lightness rather than darkness, one lived in freshness rather than bitterness. Forgiveness is a Spiritual Practice. Won't You Be My Neighbor?

May it Be So.

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