

Devotion, Sixth Week after Epiphany, 2023

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For the past two Sundays we have looked at Matthew 5 texts about murder, retaliation, and loving one's enemies. Jesus discusses 6 antitheses – he compares one thing with another, saying, "You have heard....." "but I say to you....." And what he says is the opposite of what we might think. The whole sequence of discourses is about how we have to act better and not respond to bad behavior with more bad behavior.

When Jim and I first joined Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Stone Mountain some years ago, we were directed to an adult Sunday School class that was beginning the study of Forgiveness. Jim and I knew no one in the class, so I was a little taken aback to the response to the Associate Pastor's question, "Do you find it difficult to forgive?" A woman in the class immediately spoke up and said, "I don't forgive, I get even." Wow. Dead silence and then laughter.

We spent about a month talking about this topic, based upon Leslie Weatherhead's book, The Will of God. Weatherhead wrote this book to help those grieving during World War II, and he addressed a basic question, "Why does God allow suffering in the world?" His point was that God does not desire us to suffer – God suffers along with us and is there to give us comfort. Weatherhead also talked about forgiveness, and warned against being overly trite about it – it's not easy to forgive, and sometimes, if there's no relationship left with the person who has harmed us, it's impossible. You have to be in relationship with someone in order to forgive them, and you have to work through the damage with the other person first. Just saying, "I forgive you," when nothing has been resolved as to the causes or results of what caused the damage in the first place, is just empty speech.

What Weatherhead stressed was that our task, if we can, is try to work out and redeem the relationship, if possible. If so, we can forgive each other and move on, in an improved relationship. But sometimes, that is not only possible, because we are not in a relationship with this person, or it is not healthy – for example, when we've been a victim of terrible abuse and we should not have a relationship with this person again, ever.

The task God calls us to embrace, really, is to not let the harm destroy us. Forgiveness then becomes an act of letting go of the despair and hurt and anger and not letting it control us any longer. We may never forget what harm was done to us – think of the Jews who suffered in concentration camps in WWII. But we don't have to let that experience control our lives. We move on, letting God (and perhaps the justice system) deal with punishment or restitution. If we let go of all the darkness that has controlled us, we can move past an ordeal and move on with what Jesus calls us to do. A hard task that may require some serious conversation and prayer, but a necessary one. That is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5.

Jeanne