

*“Forgiveness, and the Divine Forgettury.”*

**T**he first Episcopal bishop I can recall meeting was Harold C. Gosnell, of the Diocese of West Texas. He was the bishop who Confirmed me, back in the early 1970s, when I was a member of St. George Episcopal Church in San Antonio. But I have no particular memory of my Confirmation.

What I do remember was one of Bishop Gosnell’s visits to St. George Church, because on that particular occasion he preached on the topic of “God’s forgettury.” God’s forgettury. And if you’re wondering, God’s forgettury was the opposite of God’s memory. While I don’t know it for a fact, I *suspect* that Bishop Gosnell was preaching on today’s reading from Jeremiah, and particularly on the proclamation we heard at the end of that reading, where God makes this promise:

“I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

I don’t remember much else about his sermon, but I can distinctly remember speaking to the person sitting next to me, and making some sort of a derisive comment about the sermon in general, and— given the sermon’s topic— about the bishop’s mental health in particular. And so I suppose it’s an example of God’s sense of humor that, some forty-plus years later, here I am, about to preach a sermon about God’s forgettury. But before I can get to that, I need to explain to you what’s been going on in Jeremiah’s world.

As the words of Jeremiah were being recorded, he was speaking to that portion of the population of Israel that had been carried off into exile in Babylon. And the general consensus among those people seems to be that they brought it all upon themselves, because they ignored the covenant God made with them at Mt. Sinai, when they received the Ten Commandments. And even though there were many prophets warning them of the consequences of their actions, they just kept right on doing what they wanted to do. And now, their country has been defeated, their Temple has been destroyed, and a significant portion of their population has been taken off into exile.

And so, by the time Jeremiah gets around to issuing the proclamation we heard this morning, he was speaking to people who were feeling really low: they were regretting their past actions, they were feeling detached from God, and they could see no hope for their future. (When I was a youth back in Texas, we would have said that they were “lower than a snake’s belly in a wagon rut”.) But it’s into this darkness that God’s light shines, when God says to the people:

“The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with you. It won’t be like the old covenant. This time, I will put my law within you; I will write it on your hearts, and not on tablets of stone. And then, you will come to know me as intimately as a husband knows his wife. And from this point on I will forgive and forget all your sins.”

(That’s a quote from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translation of our text.) Well, as you can imagine, no one expected this— No one expected it!— and so it came to them as very good news indeed!

In fact, I’m that reminds me of a short story written by Ernest Hemingway. A certain Spanish father wanted to be reconciled with his son, who had run away from home to the city of Madrid. The father missed his son so much that he took out a personal ad in the local Madrid newspaper. It read:

“Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Love, Papa.”

Well, as it turns out, Paco is a very common Spanish name. And so, when the father went to the Hotel Montana the next day, there were 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers, and waiting for the forgiveness they never thought was possible!

Well, that story reminds me of those ancient Israelites— waiting for the forgiveness they never thought possible— but it also reminds me of many of the people I’ve encounter in my ministry, whose lives were weighed down by the problems, mistakes, and hurts of their past. And the fact is, many people live with the guilt they feel over something they wish they’d never said or done; while others live with the resentment and bitterness that comes from something that was done to them.

One preacher compared living under the weight of guilt *or* bitterness to trying to keep a beach ball under water. You can do it for a little while, but like an irresistible force it strains to rush back to the surface. But once you remove that beach ball from the water altogether, it's as light as a feather. In much the same way, unresolved guilt or bitterness can weigh us down, but forgiveness and reconciliation can make us feel so much lighter.

One of the sources I was looking at for this sermon suggested that our reading from Jeremiah offers us three lessons about the importance of forgiveness.

The first lesson is this: The past wrongs we've done don't have to define our future.

According to Jeremiah, God has placed the record of our past wrongdoings into his forgettery; specifically, God says: "I will remember their sin no more." And so, the question that has to be asked is: If God can, and has, forgotten our past sins and mistakes, and entirely forgiven them, why do people so often choose to hang on to them? Why is it so hard to forgive ourselves?

In a short while from now, we're going to get to that portion of our worship that's called the confession and absolution of our sins. And while we're saying the words that are set forth in our liturgy, in our hearts and minds we may be thinking about certain things we may have done or said that we regret. However, when the priest stands up and pronounces the words of absolution— the words of God's forgiveness— the fact is that God *will have forgiven us*; but the choice to believe that it's happened, the choice to live in that state of forgiveness is still up to us. And a short while after that, when we come to the altar of God to receive God's bread and wine, whether we do so with a clear conscience and light heart, or otherwise, is entirely up to us.

However, there are many people who will not believe and accept that God forgives us, and the reasons for it are as varied as the people themselves. But the unnecessary consequence of that, is that we are permitting something which we did in the past, *and for which God has forgiven us*, to continue to twist us and reshape us into something almost unrecognizable. And, like Dr. Phil, I so often want to ask the people I see doing this to themselves, "How's that been working for you?" Because generally it's not working all that well.

Clearly, for some people, letting go of guilt is so hard that it requires the intervention of a professional counselor. And just as clearly, for others, it can be

as easy as simply admitting that we got better than we deserved, deciding to be grateful for it, and getting on with our lives. But for the vast majority of us, our situation falls somewhere in between those two extremes. But in every case, the choice is up to us, and our past doesn't have to define our future.

A second lesson might be this: The past wrongs *done to us* don't have to define our future either.

Probably for all of us here, someone has either injured us or someone we love. And those injuries, whether slight or grievous, and even whether intentional or unintentional, have the ability to connect us emotionally to the person who has done the harming: we're angry at them; we resent them; maybe we'd even like to hurt them back. To a great extent, all of these reactions are normal and quite beyond our control because they're just that: reactions. In other words, early on in an injury situation, we really don't have a lot of control over how we're feeling about the person who has injured us or our loved ones.

However, at some point, we are going to find ourselves at that place where we *will* be able to choose whether we will forgive that person who caused injury, or if we will hang on to the anger and resentment.

But what I've sometimes observed is that someone will come to the decision to forgive— and not because the offender has shown any remorse, or demonstrated any contrition, or has done anything to suggest that they have earned any forgiveness— but rather because the person who has been injured has finally gotten tired of being the victim; because they're tired of being emotionally connected to the perpetrator; and because they've decided they want to regain control over the shape of their life, which unforgiveness has stolen from them. And in this situation, I think forgiveness can be a sign of strength; it can be a decision to regain control of your life. And so, the things done to us in the past, don't have to define our future either.

And a third lesson from our reading from Jeremiah seems to be this: Forgetting is one of the fruits of forgiveness.

Frederick Buechner, who is a well-regarded American writer and theologian, writes about the dangers of reliving past hurts. He writes:

“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the

prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back— in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

A few years ago I worked with a woman who was a living illustration of Buechner’s words. There’s no doubt about it, but she had a hard life. She had been on a good career path until some chronic medical issues forced her to leave that profession. She had two sons, but neither boy’s father was in the picture in any meaningful way, and her youngest son had some specific and significant emotional needs. And though she was living with a man who I think genuinely cared for her, I don’t think he had a clue about how to provide her with the kind of emotional support she really needed.

As far as I could tell, this woman spent the majority of each day rehearsing her many grievances and complaints. She would tell me, over and over again, of her bitterness and resentment (a) towards the state, because it wouldn’t award her any disability payments; and (b) towards her son’s fathers, because they were not around to help raise the boys; and (c) towards her doctors, because they couldn’t provide her with relief.

And so, there was no forgetting for this woman, because forgiveness was not in her vocabulary. Anger and resentment were the fuel for her life, and she was caught in a tragic downward spiral. It was as if she had become addicted to her anger and bitterness, and had simply consigned herself to the lot of being a victim and martyr. And if I had asked her “How’s that working for you?” I think she could easily have responded, “Quite well, thank you.”

But in the end, the truth of the matter is that none of us needs to have our future defined by our past— either by the things done to us, or by the things we have done. And when we get to the place where we can forgive, very often it will be because we have decided to quit being held hostage, and get on with the business of living.

The good news for the Israelites, back in our reading from Jeremiah, was the fact that God was going to make a new covenant with them. It wouldn’t be like the old covenant, in which the Israelites were responsible for their half of the deal, and God responsible for his half. In this new covenant, God would be responsible for both sides of the covenant. That’s what God meant when he said:

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Period. And with those words, a new day dawned for the people of Israel, and they had a renewed hope for their future.

The good news for *us* is that God’s forgettury is so much better than his memory. And the promise he made to the Israelites is the same promise he continues to make to us:

“I will forgive [your] iniquity, and remember [your] sin no more.”

And forgiven by God, we *can be* forgiving of others, and throw off the shackles of our past. The challenge for us is simply to trust that it’s true, and greet the new day with hope for a new life.

Amen.