

Turning to Forgiveness

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Luke 24:36-53

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World
Gospel Endings

*Life is an
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Bob Brenly is a TV broadcaster for the Chicago Cubs. He also played nine seasons for the San Francisco Giants. Brenly's batting average was a modest .247, but his skills with the glove kept his career alive for nine seasons. In a game with the Atlanta Braves on September 14, 1986, Brenly was called upon to play third base. The Giant's regular third baseman was injured, so Benly was pressed into service. To lead off the 4th inning, Brenly bobbled a ground ball; his first error. With the bases loaded, he booted another ground ball and threw wildly to home, resulting in two errors on a single play. Later in the inning, he muffed another ground ball; his fourth error in the same inning, tying the major league record.

Brenly atoned for his miscues in the field by belting a 5th inning home run and driving in two runs with a single in the 7th. Then, in the bottom of the 9th, with the score tied, he hit a 3-2 fastball over the left field fence to win the game.

Brenly's scorecard that night was not to be believed. He went three for five, driving in four runs on two home runs, including a 9th inning walk-off home run. He also committed

four errors in the field, which resulted in four unearned runs.

There's a moral to this story. Life is an assortment of hits and errors. We make some plays, and we botch some plays. We score some runs, and we let in some runs. Each of us is an assortment of flaws and virtues.

During the Christmas season, we examined the beginnings of Jesus' life in the gospels. Now, in this season of Eastertide, we're focusing on Jesus' post-resurrection appearances that conclude these same four gospels.

Our story opens with Jesus' disciples discussing the reports of Jesus' resurrection. The next thing they know, Jesus is standing in their midst. Evidently Jesus is able, in his post-resurrection body, to appear and vanish at will. Jesus greets his disciples with a customary refrain, "Peace be with you." His disciples, however, instinctively react with fear, thinking they have seen a ghost. Imagine our reaction if Jesus suddenly walked into worship this morning. We would freak also!

Jesus allays their fears by showing his wounds and sharing a meal with them. Luke tells us that "they disbelieved for joy" (24:41). Disbelief and

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joy might seem like a strange combination of words to appear together. Today's English Version says it well. They regard Jesus' resurrection "as too good to be true."

Jesus seizes the moment to tell his disciples that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44). In other words, the Law of Moses (called the Torah) summarizes the first five books of the Old Testament. The Prophets reference the last 19 books of the Old Testament, and the Psalms represent a portion of the Old Testament called Wisdom literature. The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms constitute the whole sweep of the Old Testament. What happened in Jesus' life does not represent a foil to God's will, but has been part of God's redemptive plan all along.

Jesus announces to his disciples, "The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day" (these words bear resemblance to our early creeds). Then he says "that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

During our sermon series on Mark's gospel, we asked three questions: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response? In answer to the question who is Jesus, we read

in verse 46 that he is the Messiah. Why did he come? He came to suffer and rise from the dead. So what is our response? Jesus answers in verse 47 that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed to all people.

The order of the Greek words *μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν* is instructive here; *μετάνοιαν* resembles our English word metamorphosis and means a change in form. Repentance has become a pejorative word in our day; some Christians are shrill in their admonition to repent or burn in hell. But repentance indicates a change of heart; a turning away from evil and toward God. *ἄφεσιν* is the Greek word for forgiveness and is associated with repentance by means of a connecting word. This is one place where I differ with most modern English translations. *Eis* is not a conjunction meaning "and," it's a preposition meaning to or toward something. So, this verse should be translated as "repentance leading to forgiveness."

I know what some of you are thinking; that Pete has just entered the abyss in preaching. He's talking about imaginary things like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys who liked to travel to Never-never land.

I'm not in Never-never land; let me show you. The word order is significant here—repentance leads to forgiveness. Repentance is the starting point

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for forgiveness. I begin with my sins and shortcomings, not your sins and shortcomings. Jesus instructed his followers in his Sermon on the Mount to take the log out of your own eye before you attempt to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). Forgiveness begins with me, not you.

Forgiveness is the deepest need of the human heart. We yearn to be forgiven and extend forgiveness to others.

So why aren’t we making much progress toward forgiveness? Something C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* resonates with me, “Everybody thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.”

We’re not making progress toward forgiveness because everyone is waiting for the other person to make the first move. I see this in families. I see it in my own family. There are people in my extended family who keep waiting for the other person to make the first move. Neither will budge until the other person makes the first overture. So, the whole sordid mess goes on indefinitely until someone dies, which insures that the feud will get passed down through the generations. Forgiveness starts with repentance—our repentance.

Pride is what keeps us from experiencing forgiveness. I hold onto the stubborn insistence that I am in the right. I don’t need to make the first

move because I am justified in my anger.

In 1755, Colonel George Washington was stationed with his troops in nearby Alexandria. An election for the Virginia State Assembly was underway between George Fairfax and William Payne. Washington was vocal in support for his friend George Fairfax. One afternoon, Washington and Payne got into an argument and Washington said something offensive. Payne became incensed and with one swing of his cane, drove Washington to his knees. Washington’s troops rushed to his defense, but their leader implored them not to intervene.

The next day Washington sent word to Payne to meet him at the town tavern. Payne took it as a challenge and went anticipating a duel. But instead of pistols on the table, there was a decanter of wine and two glasses instead. Washington stood when Payne entered the tavern. “Mr. Payne, to err is human, but to correct our errors is always honorable.” Washington had been reflecting on their previous day’s altercation and came to see his role in the conflict. He continued, “I believe I was in the wrong yesterday. If you deem my apology sufficient, here is my hand. Let us become friends.” They did become friends. So much so, that Payne served as a pallbearer at George Washington’s funeral.

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Admittedly, there is something we give up when it comes to forgiveness. We give up the right to get even. The problem of revenge is that there is simply no end to it. Like the proverbial Hatfields and the McCoys, revenge goes on forever. Forgiveness surrenders our right to get even. We let go of our need to have the last word and come out on top.

Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean we will feel all warm and fuzzy toward those who have wronged us. It only means we agree to release the other person from the debt owed to us.

People use the phrase in conversation: "forgive and forget." I'm not sure it's reasonable to expect so much of forgiveness. When I forgive someone, I can still remember the pain and hurt this person caused. It's more accurate to say when we forgive, bitterness begins to recede from center stage.

Forgiveness is not only a gift we give other people. Forgiveness is also a gift we give to ourselves.

Revenge, my friends, is a prison. While the offending party is out on the town, dancing and having a good time, we sit at home in our own self-imposed exile, nursing past hurts.

There is something perversely delicious about holding onto past hurts. Frederick Buechner captures

this sentiment well in his book *Wishful Thinking*:

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 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.

Forgiveness is absolutely central to our Christian faith. As I contemplate the enormity of God's forgiveness in my own life, I am able to set aside the relatively minor grievances other people have committed against me.

We are a mixture of sins and virtues, hits and errors. The deepest yearning of the human heart is to accept forgiveness and extend it to others. Don't wait for the other person to make the first move. Start with your repentance that leads to forgiveness.