

GUILT, FORGIVENESS & HEALING

Randall Tremba

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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Ephesians 4:1-32

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget. **Thomas Szasz**

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Last Sunday afternoon, several hours after my sermon on forgiveness, an act of vicious aggression by one person against another occurred. It occurred in the back seat of my car.

My six year-old grand daughters, Angie and Paula, had just been safely buckled up side by side in the backseat of my car. After a four-week visit with their West Virginia grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, they were heading off to the airport to fly back to Albuquerque.

Suddenly we heard a bloodcurdling scream. One twin was gushing tears. The other was gushing guilt.

"Did you hit Paula?" father Nate asked.

"Yes," said Angie, "but," she hastily added, "it was an accident," which of course was not the truth and was only a childish version of other forms of denial and subterfuge she'll learn as she becomes an adult like us. None of us handles guilt very well. We either take too much or too little or none at all.

Few of us can easily admit that we intentionally hurt others. These wounds inflicted on others may not be crimes to be tried in court; but they are sins. They are sins because they violate or destroy relationships of love and trust.

Sins wound more than the one inflicted. Sins wound the Holy One since we are all one. We are not separate. Separation is an illusion. We are one Body. One is all and all are One. A violation of one is a violation of the Holy One, which is to say, a violation of All.

And that brings us back to the lesson from Ephesians.

Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body. One spirit. One Lord. One Father of all. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up so that your words may give grace. Put away falsehood. Let all speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Or we might say: Do not wound what is whole and holy. One is all and all are One. All is Holy.

Despite what many Christians have claimed, we are not born in sin. We are not afflicted with original sin. We are born with an original blessing and given hearts full of mercy to heal broken relationships.

Let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

If you want forgiveness, speaking your truth in love is critical. When you've been hurt, say so. When you've hurt another, admit it. That's not forgiveness yet. But it's the first step in that direction. Speak your truth.

Last Sunday in the back seat of my car, one twin cried *foul*; the other cried *innocence*. In that explosive moment, forgiveness was out of reach.

In a flash, father Nate reached in, unbuckled and removed twin one. He took her for a walk. It was a time to catch her breath, to assess her behavior and to recognize the truth. After several minutes, Nate returned twin one to her seat and buckled her in next to twin two. And now it was time for "Take Two."

The adults waited in suspense.

After a couple hard swallows Angie said to Paula, "I'm sorry I hurt you." And after a few dramatic hard snuffles Paula said with a sweet voice, "I accept your apology, Angie," which only goes to show they've been through this routine before. And I'm guessing they will go through it again and again, at least 70 times seven before they're seven years old (which is only one month away!)

If that's a routine, we all need to learn it at our own respective levels and in our own respective contexts some of which may be beyond quick and easy forgiveness. Some wounds are too deep and too old, too festered to be cleansed quickly. In some cases we may need the assistance of a trusted friend, or counselor, to even approach the subject of forgiveness less we make matters worse.

It's true: we can't live in this world without hurting others or being hurt. Life is hard. And that's one of life's hard realities—hurting others and getting hurt by slings, arrows, gestures and words.

When we are hurt by another, the natural response is anger and a desire for revenge. We can't prevent anger; nor should we try. Anger is a healthy, normal response to injustice, real or imagined. We can't prevent anger.

But we can do something about the desire for revenge. And that's where love, mercy, grace, wisdom and practice come in. And it sure helps to be part of a community that teaches and supports such values and practices such as this one that has arisen out of the life of Jesus.

Be angry. But do not sin, advises the Teacher in today's lesson. *Do not let the sun go down on your anger*. Which is to say, find a way to resolve anger as quickly and constructively as possible. Venting and lashing out may make you feel better; but it doesn't do much to rebuild the relationship.

Once time passes, anger begins to ferment. Anger gradually mutates into wrath, bitterness, frustration, resentment, depression and even sickness. Anger that simmers eats us alive. Learning to manage anger is critical to human survival, sanity and health.

The same goes for guilt.

Guilt is a sign that we've done something wrong. It might be false or true guilt. We may need help in figuring out if it's one or the other and what to do about it. Still, guilt is natural and healthy. Pity the person who never feels guilt or remorse. Guilt too needs to be managed less it eats us alive. Sometimes it helps to "get out of the car," take a little walk and a few deep breaths.

Last Sunday night the twins flew home and landed safely in Albuquerque. Their friendship, sisterhood and *twin oneness* were fully restored. The back seat incident had lost its power to poison. I'm pretty sure the hurt wasn't forgotten—but it was forgiven.