**Series: #Life Together**

VBC

Pastor John Johnson

Ephesians 4:31-32

March 2-3, 2013

**“The Art of Forgiveness”**

I once spoke of Saul Bellow, a [Canadian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada)-born American [writer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writer), awarded the [Pulitzer Prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulitzer_Prize), the [Nobel Prize for Literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize_in_Literature), and the [National Medal of Arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Medal_of_Arts).

-Bellow was once acclaimed as the world’s greatest writer

-but that is not how his son remembered him upon his death in 2005—

“My father, Saul Bellow, died. Had he lived till June 10, he would have been 90. I think about him. Yet, in a disconcerting way, he is no more gone today than he was a few months ago, or at any other time of my life—for I was connected by a *slender thread* to a father who was frequently distracted and often absent.” They say it takes a year to mourn—because you have to work through all of the holidays—and other benchmarks of the calendar. The problem is, I never shared any of these times. He never celebrated a birthday with me. We never had Thanksgiving. How is his absence today any different from his absence these past forty years? Of all the conversations we have had, I swear *I can’t recall a single word*.”

How does one live with this? Can one forgive—should they?

-last week I noted that “admonish one another” is about the hardest of these “one anothers”

-but *forgiving one another* may be even harder

-I’ve noticed that in myself—and seen it in some of you

-forgiveness has been referred to as “the hardest chord to play in the human concerto”—and I think it is true

-and yet it must be played—for *community can be sustained—only in an ethos of forgiveness*—read *Ephesians 4:31-32*

-its here Paul gives us some necessary steps—answers when a young daughter asks—“How do I forgive someone who has humiliated me in front of my classmates?”

-when a spouse wonders—do I have to forgive one’s abuse?

-when a neighbor works through litigation from an ungodly neighbor

-when a church has been betrayed by one of its own members

What are the steps when someone has committed an offense that has deeply wounded us?—here are some—

1. THE FIRST STEP TO FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER—RADICAL REMOVAL

-there is a reason verse 31 comes before verse 32

-to forgive begins with clearing out the residue that comes with hurt—especially when it begins to dominate and overwhelm

-as the context suggests—these new believers at Ephesus were still bound to old ways, attitudes—behaviors sanctioned by their pagan past (verse 17)

-there was still the same temper, the same self-will, the same tendency towards retaliation

*-and maybe we find the same urges are still dominating us*

-we can’t seem to move beyond old grievances that still fester—our interior looks like verse 31

1. bitterness—resentments that that easily swell to the size of the whole history of the harm done
2. rage—the kind of indignant wrath that seethes underneath a quiet demeanor
3. anger—that turns into shouting, clamor, abusive speech—that screams and curses and vilifies
4. all malice—seems to be a catch all for anything he has left out—but it focuses on the inward—the mean spirited or vicious attitude that may be lurking down deep

-verse 31 commands us to reject these—specifically he commands that they “be taken up”, taken out, “be removed”

-the passive voice is intentional—to make the point that we cannot do this on our own

-we will need God to do this radical surgery—we cannot change our attitudes apart from the power of the Spirit

-if we don’t begin here—the heart will have no space, no power, no authority to forgive

*-there has to be death before there is resurrection!!*

1. THE SECOND STEP TO FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER—BECOME WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

-in verse 32—Paul commands us to “become kind and compassionate”

-something we took on at salvation

-a transformed life, an alternative community—people renovated by the power of Christ

-people remade into the image of Jesus—resurrected to new life (Ephesians 1-3)

-Paul chooses these because they, in particular, make forgiveness possible

-kindness and compassion acknowledge that we are limited in our perceptions of one’s motives

-that there are reasons that do help to explain this behavior that should give me pause (e.g. one’s upbringing)

*-compassion is to enter into the suffering of others*

1. THE THIRD STEP TO FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER—SEE YOURSELF AS FORGIVEN

-the “just as God has forgiven you” reminds us that we are objects of forgiveness

-we too are offenders who have lived a distorted narrative—and are desperately in need of guilt’s removal

-if I can’t forgive—it is maybe because I do not really understand what forgiveness is—because forgiveness is that overpowering

*-what God has forgiven me of is far more profound than what I could forgive you of*

-this is why when Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive (Matthew 18)

-Jesus answered with a parable that reminded Peter that he was once a man in significant debt to God

-when we truly understand this—anyone else’s offense pales in comparison

-we are now empowered—hence Sittser’s comment—

*-“The power to forgive comes from the experience of being a sinner who needs to be forgiven”*

1. THE FOURTH STEP TO FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER—FOLLOW THE MODEL OF JESUS

-the “just as God has forgiven you in Christ” points us to Christ as the template

-salvation is ultimately a call to copy, impersonate, imitate, “mimic” Jesus—we have been adopted—there should be a family resemblance (5:1)

-so then—if we are forgive as He forgives—*HOW DOES HE FORGIVE?*

-here are some of the ways—(take notes at your own risk!)

1. HIS FORGIVENESS DOES NOT WAIT—IT TAKES THE INITIATIVE

-we have a thousand excuses for not forgiving—“he needs to learn; I was the one wronged—let her come to me; how can I forgive if he is not sorry”

-but God’s forgiveness acts without conditions—we didn’t become good to receive His offer of forgiveness

-nothing was required—nothing earned

-this was what Christ did—He suspended the law of vengeance and said—“Father forgive for they do not know what they are doing”

APPLICATION—which means we too must suspend the law of vengeance

-and extend forgiveness even when someone has not first issued an apology, acknowledged injury

*-for it may be the repentance we wait for will occur only in the context of grace extended*

1. HIS FORGIVENESS LOOKS BEYOND THE OFFENSE—TO THE PERSON

-Jesus looked beyond my self-centeredness and pride and days I lived out with no thought of Him

-and times I never thought to thank Him for graces He showed me

-times I took credit for what He really did

-times I took what was His and did not give it back to Him

-His forgiveness focused on me—because of His profound love (John 3:16)

APPLICATION—so too our forgiveness must move beyond the offense to rediscover the humanity of the one who has hurt us

-how else do you explain the parable of the prodigal son? (Luke 15)

-the father looked beyond the offense to one he was in love with

1. HIS FORGIVENESS DISCERNS BETWEEN WHAT REQUIRES AND DOES NOT REQUIRE PARDON

-not all offenses necessitate forgiveness

-sometimes—they are irritating idiosyncrasies, immature blunders, inexperience, unintentional ignoring that require forbearance

-but sometimes—it is an act that violates a moral norm and damages a relationship (i.e. sin)—the context gives us clues to issues needing forgiveness—promiscuity, betrayal, narcissistic behavior, dishonesty, abusive anger, theft, hurtful speech (17-31)

Illustration—Trinity-deep sense of betrayal, forced into a huge debt of hundreds of thousands of dollars because of one member who was trusted with everything—and embezzled the church of much of its resources—this is not something one forbears—this is a deep moral failure requiring repentance and forgiveness

1. HIS FORGIVENESS IS WILLING TO PAY A SEVERE PRICE

-forgiveness is expensive—God’s forgiveness cost Him the life of His Son

-He could have disregarded sin—shrugged His shoulders, excused the offense, suppressed the conflict, tolerated the behavior

-but His justice and mercy would not let Him—so He surrendered His rights, absorbed our wrongdoing—took on our sins at the cross and paid the price of sin

APPLICATION—to forgive as Christ forgives means we too will have to surrender our rights—be willing to absorb evil without passing it on—and die-t self

-die to our right to get even, extract payment

-die to our desire to get even—to fantasies that one will be consigned to the 8th and 9th circles of Dante’s inferno—or fired or audited or suddenly gain 90 pounds

*-“To forgive is to put out a contract on our old self—the grudge bearing, self-righteous self—and then pull the trigger on ourselves” (Gregory Jones)*

-but like Christ—out of this death—we too will rise to new life

-if we are not willing to pay the price of forgiveness—we will find that the price of unforgiveness is far more costly

-something of us will still die—but it will be what God intended to live

-our joy, our health, our freedom, our peace

-we will surrender our tomorrow to the unfair pain of yesterday

-bitterness will create a crippled emotional state—an angry heart, a bitter countenance

-maybe the reason Jesus is so severe with unforgiving hearts is that He know how destructive it is for us

1. HIS FORGIVENESS FORGETS THE OFFENSE

-God could constantly keep our offenses before Him—but in His forgiveness, our sinful past is removed from the spiritual archives of heaven

-they don’t stick to us as guilt—stick to God’s memory of us

*-“It is I who sweep away your transgressions for My own sake and remember your sins no more”—Isaiah 43:25*

*-“As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us”—Psalm 103:12*

-He has taken our sins and placed them totally out of reach—*under the cover of impenetrable obscurity—Volf*

-so we are also called to forget—let the offense slip into oblivion—eventually

-it will take time—but we are able to do this when we are focused forward, not back

-seeing re-creation as its goal

CONCLUSION

Church communities must be cities busy with the traffic of forgiveness—practicing until we get it right

-for forgiveness is our compelling witness

-without it—we lose our voice—we short circuit our mission

-we have no gospel to share

*“We who claim to follow Jesus can make that claim good only insofar as we live by the rule of forgiveness—serious forgiveness”—NT Wright*