

The Messiness of Forgiveness

JOURNEY worship service—Calvary Lutheran

Rolf Olson (Katherine's father)

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Thanks... honor to be here...

Andy invited me a couple of months ago and convinced me that I have something worth listening to... hope he's right. The Olson and Jolivette families have criss-crossed in many ways over the years. It's been great. Tonight's the latest edition.

My guess is that the Olson family has had significant connection with many of you as well —whether through Sarah or Katherine or Karl... or maybe through the Lutheran college or camp circuit. This past year has been wild-- & you've been wonderful. On behalf of my family I want to thank you for your incredible support through our ordeal. Keep it coming.

I know that the Journey community is in a series on forgiveness. I'm here to wrap it up with my personal experience. I wish I had a neat little formula to teach you, but I don't. My experience has shown me that forgiveness is far more messy than it is neat and tidy. I know that Jesus spoke about forgiving 70 X 7. In the Lord's Prayer he tied God's forgiveness of us with our forgiveness of others... *"forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."*

Forgiveness is CORE to our experience of following Jesus. But it's never easy. It's rarely quick and clean. But it's a great gift from God. Tonight I'll tell you what I know.

How many of you are familiar with the basic gist of our story?

Briefly, last October 25th—Thursday—our 24 year old daughter, Katherine, went to Savage to answer a craigslist ad for a nanny. Katherine was a 2006 graduate of St. Olaf, a theater and Hispanic studies major, 3.9 GPA, had plans to become a Spanish professor someday.

She loved kids—and kids loved her. So she found work as a nanny to be something that paid the bills and gave her joy. On October 25 she drove out to Savage to meet 2 kids and a mother named Amy.

To condense the process: we didn't know Katherine was missing until suppertime on Friday—24 hours later. Nancy called me to say that police had found her purse in a garbage can in Savage. They didn't mention the garbage bag that they later found underneath. In that bag was a bloody towel wrapped around Katherine's broken cell phone. A man's name was on the towel.

5 hours later they found her body in the trunk of her car. She had been shot in the back. About the same time they arrested a 19 year old man whose name was on that bloody towel. He's still in jail awaiting trial for first degree murder.

The whole thing would make a pretty lame CSI episode. I wish that's all it were.

For legal purposes I need to stop here. We've been cautioned about pre-trial publicity so I want to keep my comments to a minimum. Needless to say, we are confident that the trial will answer most of the questions surrounding this horror. But we'll have to wait until January for that. We want a fair process and no appeals so we want it to get done right.

Since October we have been overwhelmed with cards and letters and prayer support from all 7 continents. The most visible evidence of God's presence has been the incredible love that has surrounded us. Let me tell you: ***it has kept us alive.*** We weren't sure if our son Karl would be able to finish his senior year at St. Olaf. He did. Nancy and I just returned from 3 weeks in Italy for our 30th wedding anniversary. Our firstborn, Sarah, continues with her MBA studies at St. Thomas and work at the St. Paul Foundation. She's happily married to our wonderful son-in-law, Doug.

Sarah is leading the planning team for a memorial concert next April or May. Watch the website for more details: concertforkatherine.com. Check out [FACEBOOK.com: Remembering Katherine Ann Olson](https://www.facebook.com/RememberingKatherineAnnOlson)

We know that God is good. Life is good. The resurrection is true. Those core convictions carry us through it all.

But sin is also very real. Evil breaks into God's good world and tries to derail God's goodness and turn people into depressed cynics who spoil the party for everyone else. We've all been there. You know what I'm talking about.

It's precisely because of this that God's gift of forgiveness is so important.

As much to get my own head straight as to help my congregation through their grief, I preached a series on forgiveness for Lent. Forgiveness is a topic about which we all know something... but a *practice* with which we all have difficulty. We know about Betrayal. Abuse Name calling. Two-timing. Broken promises. Secrets. Intentional hurt. Unintentional harm. So we hurt. We hate. We aren't sure what to do when our anger boils over. Sometimes **we're** the ones who need to be forgiven. It's just part of living in a broken world where we are deeply involved. If we want to have on-going relationships then we will need to experience giving & receiving forgiveness. It's about as important a lesson to learn as there is. So we went into it pretty deeply at RLC. It seemed to work pretty well.

To get us going tonight, I want us to consider 4 things that forgiveness is not.

What forgiveness is NOT

In the 1st place,

* Forgiveness is not **excusing** the behavior.

“Oh, that’s O.K. You were having a bad day. We’ll just let it go.”

We might say that over *bad manners*, but not over insulting behavior. Behavior always has consequences. Forgiveness can’t be used to whitewash away the natural consequences of people’s actions. People need to be held accountable for their behavior—and THEN we can move into the forgiveness phase.

In the same way,

* Forgiveness isn’t **minimizing** the offense.

“Oh, it’s not that big a deal. We’ll get over it.”

In **our** case, that would be delusional. It’s going to take years for us to find peace about this.

How many people stuff their real feelings to gloss over the offense?...

*“oh I’m not **angry**. I’m just concerned.”* We Scandinavians are great at this.

We can gloss over all sorts of grotesque things, but that’s not forgiveness. It’s just denial. It’s avoidance. Even the New Testament says we need to call a spade a spade. Ephesians 4 says: *be angry but do not sin*. We need to honestly express our feelings.

When someone treats us poorly our response is anger—sometimes a LOT of it. It’s a normal response. But most of us are so uncomfortable with our anger that we just stuff it. If that’s the case we may have a truce, but we’ll never have a reconciliation. There’s no forgiveness and no healing. And the emotions just fester.

A 3rd point:

* Forgiveness is not forgetting.

When something happens that pierces our soul, our memories won’t let go. That hard drive can’t be erased. It’s precisely because we CAN’T forget that we need to forgive.

Lastly,

Forgiveness is not fair.

It always fights against our search for fairness in life.

But what are the alternatives?

We could choose to NOT forgive....

We can choose to remain stuck in the past. We can choose to replay tapes of the transgression and relive all the emotional baggage that came with it— all the anger, the hurt, the public embarrassment, the shame... you name it.

The problem with choosing to not forgive is that then WE are victimizing ourselves. We're punishing ourselves w/ the original pain over & over again. Every time we replay the event we let the victimizer do it to us one more time. Only now it's something that we do while our transgressor may be having a jolly-good time moving on in life. He or she may be clueless to what we're going through.

Then there's Vengeance....

We can choose to try to get even. The problem with this is that none of us views the pain inflicted the same way. When we try to get back at someone else, the pain they feel is greater than *our perception* of what we inflicted on them. We feel satisfied. There. Now we're even. They feel like they have received worse than what they originally delivered. So they feel the need to retaliate. On it goes. So we have Israel & Palestine. Hatfields and the McCoys. As Ghandi said, if we try to live by the motto '*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*' we'd all walk around bumping into each other—blind and toothless."

The alternative to getting even is forgiveness. Of course forgiveness violates our sense of fairness that gets set early in life. Who hasn't heard their precocious child scream: *that's not fair!* It's in the job description for every kid—starting about age 4. Our response: *sorry kid. Life isn't fair.*

As we grow up we begin to see that the innocent suffer. We watch the dishonest get away with their misdeeds. We see bullies pick on the weak. Maybe the weak are us. So we rage at the unfairness of it all. We demand fairness. But life isn't fair. It's a cruel reality we live with.

Forgiveness gives us a tool to use in dealing with the unfairness we encounter each day.

What forgiveness is

In his book, Forgive and Forget (New York, NY.: HarperCollins, 1984), Lewis Smedes defines forgiveness this way:

Forgiveness is God's invention for coming to terms with a broken world in which, despite our best intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply. Forgiveness is love's toughest work, and love's biggest risk. [p. xv-xvi]

Smedes' definition of forgiveness works for me. *Forgiveness is a tool from God to repair the inevitable brokenness that accompanies every relationship.*

Thank God that very few ever have to deal with such horror as our family is dealing with. But we ALL face the need to forgive every day.

God's intention for life is to live in healthy relationships. Essential to healthy relationships is the process of letting go of our hurts. We need to *push the reset button* when life gets testy and then we can start fresh. I believe that the power of Jesus Christ in our lives frees us to do that.

I remember in seminary a bunch of us were in a preaching seminar with Lowell Erdahl who later became our bishop. He told us that one of the keys to a healthy marriage was dealing with our rage with each other. We were these romantic young guys. We didn't believe him. We just smiled & nodded our heads. But you know what? After 30 years of marriage I KNOW he was right. Without dealing with the rage we sometimes feel in our marriages we can kiss them goodbye. Forgiveness is essential to any long-term relationship. It's a tool that God gives for healing.

Way back in Leviticus God laid the foundation for all this.

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19: 2, 18)

We are holy because God says so. Jesus died to show the value we have to our creator. The people to whom we relate—our family, friends, neighbors... they have the same immeasurable worth that we do. It's the basis for all the forgiving that we're called to do.

Robert Schuller got it right: God loves you and so do I. At times that gets really hard.

I have to make a clarification here. Many people have quoted me as saying at the funeral that we forgave Michael John Anderson. We haven't. We've never met him. He hasn't confessed. We're just in limbo.

What we DID say was to pray for him and his family. God loves him as much as Katherine or any of us. As much anger as we feel, we want the best for him. We want a fair trial. We want justice to be done. Frankly, we aren't doing very well at praying for him or his family. We've got plenty of issues to pray for. But we have asked that YOU do the praying—especially for his family. It's a mess—and we ask you to help.

The New Testament word for forgiveness is *aphiemi*: to let go, to release, to leave behind. That's clearly different than love. Often we get the two mixed up. We love people *no matter what* they do. We want the best for others *no matter what* they do. But we don't have to love their behavior. So we use the gift of forgiveness to work out the brokenness we experience.

But sometimes *working things out together* isn't an option. Sometimes forgiveness takes on a solo quality. Sometimes we need to do it for our own sake, & our own sake alone.

This is my last point for the night.

As I preached on forgiveness at Richfield Lutheran this spring people talked to me about all sorts of situation where reconciliation wasn't possible... where an honest sharing of pain and mutual forgiveness couldn't happen...

** Abusive fathers now dead

** Abusive boyfriends now gone...

I thought of OUR situation: unconfessed, ambiguous, cut off, plodding along. In these situations the New Testament is a wonderful help:

aphiemi... let it go... release it's power over you.

Maybe we can't experience reconciliation, but we CAN find release.

3 ex-soldiers were standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

1st soldier—' have you been able to forgive those who held you as a prisoner of war?'

2nd soldier—'I will NEVER forgive them!'

3rd soldier—'then it seems like they still have you in prison, don't they?'

Sometimes solo journeys to the land of forgiveness are permitted. Sometimes we just need to let go.

When we keep replaying in our heads the tape of the past misdeed, then the emotional pain & anger & resentment come along with it. When we let that happen...

* We remain in a North Vietnamese prison.

* We continue to feel abused by a trusted parent or friend.

* We continue to give the perpetrator power in our lives

Sometimes forgiveness is letting go for your sake, & not necessarily for the relationship. --aphiemi--

Many of you know about Desmond Tutu, the retired Anglican leader in South Africa. He chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as they tried to bring healing to that country after apartheid fell. In his book, No Future Without Forgiveness, he defined forgiveness as **relinquishing my right to get revenge**.

Of course the blacks in South Africa have *all sorts* of justification for demanding revenge against the white regime. That regime had treated the majority black population so poorly. But from the wisdom of the Christian faith, Tutu knew that there was no future in that.

The title of his book says it all: there is no future without forgiveness. There is no future if we remain stuck on trying to even the score, struggling to untangle incomprehensible relationships & complicated social structures. Sometimes the only way forward is to cut ourselves free from the past, to relinquish the right to get revenge.

What else can we do with dead parents who abused us? What else can our family do with Katherine's murderer: someone with whom we never had a relationship and never will? Forgive-- *let go*. Relinquish the right to get revenge. Do it for yourself. Do it... even if the guilty person doesn't repent or apologize. Don't let the guilty person's *stubbornness* control your need to be *healed*.

When we need help we can remember what Jesus said on the cross. As he hung there helplessly he cried out:

“Father, YOU forgive them, for they know not what they do”

Even Jesus needed God's supernatural intervention. Many times that's our only hope. *Father—YOU do it. I don't know how.* We trust that God can untangle whatever web of hurt, anger, & pain that afflicts us. On the cross, Jesus gave us a wonderful precedent.

Time to wrap this up.

We've been talking about how forgiveness is a wonderful tool from God that helps us to heal broken relationships. But it's never easy, and rarely speedy. It's a messy process

The fact that we are loved eternally & forgiven unconditionally lays the groundwork.

God's goal is harmony. It was God's intention from the *beginning*. It will be God's accomplishment at the *end*. *In between*, we have this wonderful gift called forgiveness... a gift empowered by the H. S. to use in bringing about harmony now.

Thanks for letting me share how this gift is working out in our lives.