



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

I was having a conversation the other day with someone struggling with forgiveness. She had been working really hard to try to help somebody out. She was bending over backwards to go the extra mile, do the right thing, and yet there were some who wanted to do nothing but question her motives. Criticize her efforts. A few even suggested, you know, she might be making things worse. And what's more, it was coming from people who hadn't been willing to lift a finger to help. People that just stayed on the sidelines, keeping their hands clean so they could carp and criticize.

Anyone identify with that? I know we're Episcopalians. Can I get an amen on that? And what's more, these people weren't strangers. They were members of her own family. Can I get an amen on that? And so she was struggling with forgiveness because this wasn't the first time they had done this sort of thing to her. So she came to me asking, Chris, at what point, at what point does the old fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me – at what point does that kick in? When can I just say, you know, I have had it with you people.

So I reminded her of the time that Peter asked Jesus, essentially that very same question. You remember that one? Where Peter goes to Jesus and says, look, I'm with you on this forgiveness thing. I really am. I get it. But we can't just keep forgiving them, can we? I mean, certainly there has to be some kind of limit. What, would maybe seven times be enough? To which Jesus famously responds, try 70 times 7 times. In other words, forgiveness has no limits. We don't get to cut people off because God doesn't cut us off. And as followers of Jesus, we are called to offer the same forgiveness that God gives us.

Well, she wasn't buying it. That may be all true Chris, but you know, I'm just not ready to forgive yet. They need to own up to what they did. They need to admit they were wrong. They need to apologize. Oh, and they need to quit complaining and they need to roll up their sleeves and they need to start helping. They do all that, they do those things, and maybe I'll consider forgiving them. So I asked her, okay, any chance they're going to do that? And she was absolutely adamant, absolutely not.

So she was left stuck in this place of resentment. And we talked about that old saying about how resentment is like drinking poison. Have you heard that one?

Resentment is like drinking poison in the hope that somehow the other person would get sick. Why do we do that to ourselves? Why is it so hard to let things go? Well, there's probably lots of reasons, but I'm going to guess that most of them probably stem from fear. That one thing that the scriptures tells us over and over again, not to be – do not be afraid.

But it's easier said than done. So we protect ourselves, right? We don't trust easily. We can be quick to judge. When Jesus says, turn the other cheek, most of us can be too busy keeping score, keeping track of how many times you wronged us, whether or not you said sorry, whether or not you returned the thing you borrowed or paid for the thing you broke. If you wrong us, we tend to retaliate. If you exclude me, I exclude you. If you disappoint me, I can walk out on you. We may not always hit back in the same way, but we will find some way to try to settle the score. And if we can't do that, well, we'll try to punish you with resentment.

That's what life looks like when we live out of fear. We withhold God's forgiveness. We hold it for kind of a ransom, if you will, until some kind of price is paid or some kind of condition is met. And so rather than turn the other cheek, it becomes this never ending cycle of eye for an eye, each time adding one more barrier upon barrier between us when we should be tearing them down.

When you hear people say, we live in a broken world, that's the brokenness we're referring to. In fact, this mindset, this brokenness, it's so pervasive. It's so embedded in the way we see the world and the way we imagine reality that we even imagine God to be this way, don't we? Sometimes? If we judge people, do we think that maybe God does too? If we can write people off, can we imagine that God does so as well? If we require payment before we can forgive, then maybe God does too.

Or have you never heard of the penal substitutionary atonement theory? I know, I know. I took the words right out of your mouth, didn't I? I know. It's basically the theory that before God could forgive humanity, somebody needed to pay the debt of our sins. Somebody had to suffer, somebody had to die, blood had to be spilled. And according to that theory, that someone was Jesus.

A guest preacher some months ago, described it this way: imagine that God was lining up all his misbehaving children – that is all of us. Lining us up for the whooping of a lifetime. And just as God raised his hand, Jesus came swooping in and took the beating for us. Didn't that just warm your heart? I was listening to this and I'm thinking, where was Child Protective Services when we needed them? Get God some anger management classes.

And if that happens to be your theory of God, I'm not here to judge. Reasonable minds can disagree. As Episcopalians, we've always been bound by common prayer, not necessarily common belief. And more importantly, if it helps you be

more loving and more compassionate, if it's helping you to be more generous and more accepting in your life, by all means.

But here's the caution that I would have. If we see God that way, if we see God as fundamentally transactional, if we see God as judging and keeping score, one whose love we need to earn, one who needs to be paid off before he can forgive. If that's the God that we see, then it shouldn't surprise us when certain corners of the church behave that way as well, which brings us to today's gospel where we have the temple putting all these barriers, all these requirements on the faithful who are just trying to get close to God. Requiring them to travel long distances at a time when traveling long distances was dangerous, was expensive, and really, really hard. And when they arrived, requiring them to buy an animal to sacrifice in order to earn God's favor at a time when many people were poor.

And then there was the temple tax, another onerous burden on many. And then there was making those who could afford to pay for all of that first have to pay again to exchange their money because the temple wouldn't accept the coins with the graven images of the emperor. And each step of the way, there was corruption, there was exploitation, there were payoffs, upcharges, you name it. All of it amounted to one barrier after another, one payoff after another, one transaction after another. As people were forced to try to buy or earn God's grace.

And if you think about it, it's never really stopped, has it? Remember your history when the Catholic Church tried to sell forgiveness? They called it indulgences. Same kind of thing. And I know there are a lot of you here today who have felt the sting of churches who continue to try to put up barriers between us and God. Churches that deny God's blessing because of who you are, or who you love, or who your children might be. Churches that deny you full participation because you were once divorced or perhaps baptized in the wrong denomination. Or women to this day still being barred from serving in the ways God is calling them, merely because of their gender.

I met someone the other day who came to this church because her last one before she could volunteer, required her to sign a pledge condemning LGBT folks, many of whom were her best friends. When my husband Joe was a kid, he was denied first communion because his mom worked full time and couldn't always bring him to church as often as they wanted. Last year, that same church, that same church, tried to deny communion to my own daughters, at a funeral no less. Notice I said try? Little did that priest know that their Italian grandmother was standing right there. And let's just say my mother-in-law, Sue, can be a force of nature when she needs to be. So as she started to fasten her whip of cords, that priest saw the light and relented very wisely,

But I know there are countless other stories out there, and if you have been touched by one as well, there is good news today. Because if this gospel is

anything to go by, nothing, nothing makes Jesus more angry than when we try to put a price on God's love. When we try to withhold God's forgiveness, when we try to claim that we have God, and if you want him, you've got to go through all these hoops. You've got to meet all these conditions if you want to meet Him as well.

And so if you're tired of being judged or if you're tired of judging others, if you're tired of keeping score or keeping all of those resentments going. If you're exhausted from trying to earn God's love, pretending to be someone you're not, or worrying about what you might have done to earn God's wrath, Jesus comes today to tell us loud and clear, we don't need to be. We don't have to continue that cycle. We don't have to be a part of transactional, conditional religion, or transactional conditional relationships anymore. We don't need to pay God off. We don't have to earn his acceptance because Jesus has come to overturn all of those tables and invites us to do as well.

Notice when the Temple authorities challenge Jesus, He doesn't complain about the corruption. He's not angry about the inflated prices or the payoffs. He's not trying to reform the system. He comes to overturn all of it because such systems put up barriers that God never wanted, and they keep us from the abundant life He came to give.

We don't need to pay an admission to find God. We don't need to buy off God's forgiveness. We don't need to conform to someone else's standard or try to earn God's favor because the good news is we already have it and we always have. God doesn't love us if we change. God loves us in hopes that we might, so that we might offer that same love and forgiveness to the world.

Jesus is angry today because it's never been about the building. It's never been about conditions or barriers. It was never supposed to be about manipulating or controlling. It was always about the good news that with God, we are all welcomed, all loved. Heaven, Heaven, my friends. It won't be a courtroom scene with God as our judge. It will be, as Jesus describes it, a wedding banquet where there is a seat for everyone, where all are invited, all are welcome and all always have been. It's the banquet that we model right here every Sunday at our altar. because it's the world that we seek to build when we leave those doors.

It will be like a wedding banquet where there's nothing but joy, nothing but singing and love. When all of us finally share, all of us finally share that eternal embrace that eluded us in life. And there will be laughter, I think. I think we will all share one giant, enormous laugh at how much time we spent harboring resentments, how much time we spent debating God's love, arguing about who deserves it and who didn't, when we could have been sharing it, when we could have been sharing it all along.

Amen.

