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John 8:2-11 June 8, 2008
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The story of the woman caught in adultery exemplifies our second Bedrock Belief: "God forgives every sin through Jesus Christ." It is like a case study, and so I want us to treat it that way for a moment. How would you respond to the following questions?

Leviticus 20 prescribed stoning for a woman caught in adultery. Was the law just?

What would you have done if you had been Jesus? Would you have intervened to save the woman's life, knowing that you would be breaking the law in doing so?

What would you have done if you had been the woman's husband? Would you have been standing there with a stone in your hand or thanking Jesus for saving your wife's life?

What I want us to see is how scandalous our Bedrock Belief really is. It raises the question of justice, doesn't it? Shouldn't she pay for her sins? Furthermore, can we ever really forgive a spouse who has had an affair, or a teenager who is into drugs, or someone like Hitler? Should we?

Forgiveness hardly seems fair. So why is it one of our Bedrock Beliefs? *Because it is one of the profoundest unshakeable anchors handed to us by God. It can save your life and the lives of those you love.*

The Bible is clear. If we can't forgive ourselves or others, or ask for forgiveness, we will die inside and take others down with us.

Matthew 6:14-15 – *14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (NRSV)*

How important was forgiveness to Jesus? Listen to this dialogue in Matthew 18:21-22. *21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (NRSV)*

Our Bedrock Belief expresses our conviction that God forgives every sin, and in so doing gives us the courage and motivation to forgive others.

Let us talk about our conviction first. It rises out of what Jesus did for us **by dying on the cross.** He died for the forgiveness of our sins.

What do I mean? 2000 years ago, Jesus was nailed to a cross by those who refused to believe he was the Messiah and God's Word to a sinful generation. It was those who wanted to be their own gods, to make their own rules, who nailed him to the tree. *And we are still doing it.* It is our sin that put Jesus on the cross. Every time we choose to go our own way and be our own gods, we put a nail in the flesh of the only one innocent enough to be called the Son of God. The Bible says every one of us is guilty of his murder. None of us is without sin. Isn't this what Jesus pointed out to the religious leaders who wanted to stone the woman? If you have no sin, then be my guest. Throw the first stone at her.

Not one of us is guiltless. That may sound rather negative. But what we know and have experienced in Jesus is anything but negative. **Though not guiltless, we are not condemned.**

Our sin put Jesus on the cross, but in his death he revealed the heart of God. God does not choose to punish us for our sin. Rather, God chooses to give us a way out. God could have called down fire and brimstone on the heads of those who drove the nails into the hands and feet of Jesus. Instead, Jesus prays from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus forgives us. And in so doing unleashes a power that melts our hearts of stone and turns us in faith to God. God forgives us of the worst sin we have ever committed, the murder of his only Son. If God has done that, then there is no sin God will not forgive.

You see, for us, Jesus is **the solution** to the source of all our problems in life. The source of all our problems is sin, this gnawing desire wired inside us to be our own gods. Until we admit that we are trying to be our own gods, we will never know the empowering and transformative beauty of God's forgiveness.

Nothing will change. We will remain stuck in our addictions, our hatreds, our habits, our attitudes, our guilt, our lost lives. We will never reach our potential for making a difference in the world. We will never weep in love for God. We will never feel the healing grace of what Jesus did for us. Not until we can say, "God, forgive me!"

C. S. Lewis has a wonderful way of capturing the beauty of Christianity. "Christianity," he wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better. You see, that remedy is moralism and legalism – which makes us nice, but it doesn't make us new." Rather, Christianity is "like turning a horse into a winged creature . . . [so] it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped."

Our Bedrock Belief is a conviction. **It is also the source of our courage and motivation to forgive others.**

In other words, because God forgives us, though we do not deserve it, we commit to living our lives on a different plane. Instead of harboring resentments, seeking revenge, or writing off every broken relationship, we take on the hard work of forgiveness. What Jesus did on the cross gives us access to heaven. It also breaks our hard hearts and puts our lives on a different footing. It releases our best selves for the best experience of life God can give us. It releases us to go into the streets to share the good news of Christ's forgiveness of every sin.

Now, here is the really tough part about forgiveness as the Bible teaches it. **It must be the real deal.** Jesus didn't die just to make us feel better about our sins. Forgiveness is not about overlooking the sins of others or simply a way to let go of the past hurts. It is not about letting the other person off the hook. God does not simply let us off the hook. God drives home our guilt and then makes it possible for us to change, to gain redemption. Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing. I find it hard to forget, don't you?

Real forgiveness seeks to *build bridges* between the offending and the offended party. Isn't that the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice? It was to build a bridge between us and God, to reconnect us with God on a new footing.

So it was for the woman caught in adultery. The Law did require stoning. Jesus chose the path of transformation. He saved her from a certain death, and then gave her the terms of forgiveness. "Go and sin no more." We cannot say that we have forgiven another unless we have made the effort to restore the relationship on a different level.

Having said that, please hear that real forgiveness usually *takes time*. Sometimes a long time. It may take years, maybe a lifetime. It is not a switch that we can flip. It is not even one size fits all. It is a process that we have to enter into with every hurt. Someone said forgiveness is not something we do, it is something we discover.

So what is the process? It begins with *mutual respect*, recognizing each other as a valued child of God. If we get that far, the next step is the admission of guilt and *genuine repentance* of the wrong that has been done. If that happens, there is the possibility of *transformation*. When those three things happen, we can say that we have experienced forgiveness.

Let me tell you that real forgiveness is something I still struggle with. A year ago, I spent a week with a group of pastor friends at Ghost Ranch as I have done nearly every year for the past 17 years. We talk about churches, our families, and how we are doing. One pastor last year told us that he had been having a non-stop headache for almost nine months. He had been to specialists of all sorts but to no avail. To tell you the truth, I felt sorry for him. He was having a tough time at his church, he said.

Lots of problems. We suggested he get a medical leave of absence and some other things. We prayed for him.

One month later, I got some shocking news about this pastor. He showed up at his office one day, packed up a few things, and left town without telling anyone where he was going. It turns out that he had been having a love affair over the internet with a woman in North Carolina and went there to be with her. He simply abandoned his family and his church.

This year at Ghost Ranch, you can imagine what we talked about, a lot. I admitted that I was bitter. That man had lied to us from day one the year before. I smirked, more than once, "No wonder he had headaches!" He abused our compassion for him. I had some thoughts about what he could go and do to himself. (Told you I have trouble with forgiveness.)

Finally, by the end of the week, the pastor in our group who thought he was the man's best friend in the world and yet had heard nothing from him about any of this, said he had decided what he needed to do. He said he was going to go find our friend and tell him that God forgives him and we forgive him and try to get him to come home again. I admitted it was a good idea, the biblical thing to do, but also admitted it would take a while longer for me to get over my bitterness. Then we talked about other bitteresses we had and one of the other pastors said he needed to contact someone he had been resenting for a number of years. And I believe that is what God wants. Why Jesus died on the cross. To heal wounds. To build bridges. As hard as it is, it is the work God gives us to do. It is the work God helps us do, empowers us to do through Jesus Christ, and I need all the help I can get.

I think we have enough resentment, revenge, and anger in the world, don't you? God calls his church to be the exception. And at SBPC we are committed to being the exception. Because we know what Jesus did for us, how much he paid for our forgiveness, we want to be warriors of forgiveness. God put us here to go to our brothers and sisters, to tell them that their lives can be different, their problems solved, their hopes raised because God forgives every sin through Jesus Christ. This is the path to the peace, purpose, and promise we all long for.