

Article of Faith: Sin and Forgiveness
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Matthew 23: 23 – 26

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

Romans 3: 21 - 24

21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus

What is sin?

It's that which creates distance between us and God. Distance that we put there, because we don't think we really need to do what God says.

Because we lose our temper. Or just get tired. Or just plain stubbornly decide we know better and want to go our own way.

We sin as individuals. We sin as a congregation. We sin as a community. We sin as a nation. As the traditional prayer of confession goes, we sin by the things we do and by the things we don't do. Breaking a vow. Gossiping. Lashing out in anger because we want someone else to feel as horrible as we do.

The sin of racism. The sin of inequality.

Yesterday was the first annual Katherine Johnson day here in West Virginia.¹ It's on her birthday. She was born in 1918, which made her 99 years old yesterday. We're celebrating her because was, is, an amazing mathematician who helped the United States space

¹ <https://www.nasa.gov/content/katherine-johnson-biography>

<https://www.nasa.gov/audience/foreducators/a-lifetime-of-stem.html>

<https://wvdailynews.net/3422-katherine-coleman-goble-johnson-celebrated-on-99th-birthday-with-building-named-in-her-honor>

http://www.register-herald.com/news/katherine-johnson-marks-th-birthday-in-space-city/image_35bec8af-bbd7-5694-bd17-66d784996271.html

program- getting the shuttles into space and then getting them home, by working on the very precise calculations required.

She was born in White Sulphur Springs, and lived there until the family had to move so she could continue her education.

And continue she did, completing high school at age 14, from college at age 18, and being one of the first three African Americans to integrate West Virginia's graduate school in 1939.

Yesterday, they named the library in White Sulphur Springs after her. Incredibly appropriate. But also ironic, because she would not have been allowed to enter that library when she was a child in White Sulphur Springs.

I was not, of course, alive in the 1920s when that was happening, but isn't there something to confess here? I may not have made those decisions, but I am a part of the culture that perpetuated them. And I'd like to be a part of a better tomorrow, that is more open, more faithful and therefore more equal community. Which may sometimes means stepping back in order to help everyone stand in the same place.

And so I wonder, if anyone considered an apology, a confession as a part of yesterday's declarations.

Because forgiveness, healing, moving forward, is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, until we acknowledge where we are and how we got there.

Google maps won't chart out the directions to your destination until you enter your starting point.

It is, of course, easier to see other people's sins before we see our own.

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The first morning, while they are eating breakfast, the young woman sees the neighbor hang up the wash outside.

"That laundry is not very clean," she said, "she doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs another laundry soap." The husband looked on, but remained silent.

Every time her neighbor would hang out the wash, the young woman would make the same comment.

About one month later, the woman was surprised to see nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband,

"Look! She has learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this?"

Her husband said, "I got up early this morning and washed the windows."

And so it is with life: What we see while watching others depends on the purity of the window through which we look.

But, to sum up what we believe about sin, Paul said it best. We have all sinned and fallen short. We hold that in common.

What do we do with that?

It brings us to forgiveness.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is saying yes.

Yes to a process of letting go.

Forgiveness,

is a word that is translated as letting go.²

Letting go of a burden.

Relinquishing.

Release from captivity.

In its most dramatic forms, I think of

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa.

A father's forgiveness for the driver of the vehicle

that crashed into his own, taking the life of his son.³

A community reaching out to the parents and wife

of the man who killed their children.⁴

Forgiveness which many of us find difficult to imagine, the hurt and the pain.

Does it go without saying, nobody starts with that kind of forgiveness?

When learning how to forgive, you don't start on the summit of Everest.

It starts in the lowlands, with every day life.

All of us practice forgiveness in our lives, each day.

Forgiveness for the little things, the getting along things,

² <http://biblehub.com/greek/630.htm>

³ <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article22758948.html>

"The father of two small children killed in a wreck last weekend celebrated their brief lives Sunday and told more than 800 mourners at Forest Hill Church that he and his wife have forgiven the truck driver who caused the accident."

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/28/the-amish-american-experience-pbs-premier_n_1306585.html

"The man who walked over to his neighbor's home wasn't going over to make some grand gesture. He was making a gesture to God that he would forgive. He hadn't forgiven and forgotten already. But by making that statement, he was opening the door to forgiveness."

that simply makes life in community, with family, possible.
 The mug put in the wrong place.
 The thing that got left off of the list at the grocery store.
 The lunch box left on the counter.
 The forgotten birthday or anniversary.
 The work we meant to do but didn't get done.

Situations where it is easiest to come clean, admit it, and move forward anew.

When I was the newly installed pastor in Greencastle, Pennsylvania I set up an appointment to visit one of our most faithful members. Not only the most faithful, but also the most fun. She was a woman who walked around with dog treats in her pocket to give to all of the neighborhood dogs. Everyone loved her.

I set up the appointment, wrote it on my calendar (yes, there was a time when almost everyone used paper calendars) and then when the appointed afternoon came, I went grocery shopping. I forgot all about it. Until I was driving back to our new home with a trunk full of groceries and went past her house. Which is when I remembered. I was now almost two hours late for our appointment. So I quickly parked went in, and apologized. Told her how it was unlike me to miss an appointment. How sorry I was. I went on for about five minutes like that when she finally found a way to get a word in, when she looked at me kindly and said, "Anna, it's okay. Don't worry about it. We can meet another time. But you know, I find that when I do something like this, it usually means my scheduled and my mind is overloaded. Maybe you are trying to do too much? But yes. We can meet another time. Please don't give this another thought. Of course you are forgiven."

And I was. I've never forgotten her grace. Or her wisdom. She was, of course, exactly right.

And maybe you, too, have experienced such grace from someone who knew the hole you were in because they had been there, too?

Professor of Pastoral Care John Patton writes

"Human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something....

I am more like these who hurt me than I differ from them"⁵

I've certainly been the recipient of this kind of forgiveness (maybe you, too?).

From those who know what it is to make a mistake.

To say the wrong thing.

⁵ John Patton, "Is Human Forgiveness Possible?"

John Patton. "Preaching On Forgiveness." *Journal For Preachers* 32.2 (2009): 9-15. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection*. Web. 8/6/15.

John Patton. "Human Forgiveness As Problem And Discovery." *Christian Century* 102.27 (1985): 795-797. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection*. Web. 8/6/15.

Hurtful because you weren't paying attention.
Falling apart when you needed to hold it together.

But... what about when you climb up on the mountain of forgiveness,
move past these daily forgiveness's that most of us hold in common?
To the hurts that linger and wounds that aren't so quickly healed?
Betrayal, infidelity, addiction, abandonment.

That's when we realize and have to live the truth that forgiveness isn't a force of will or a single action, but a process, something that unfolds over time, a willingness, an openness to the future.

I turn here to the words of Jan Richardson, poet and artist in her poem "The Hardest Blessing"⁶

If we cannot
lay aside the wound
then let us say
it will not always
bind us.

Let us say
the damage
will not eternally
determine our path.

Let us say
the line of our life
will not forever follow
the tearing, the rending
we have borne.

Let us say
that forgiveness
can take some practice,
can take some patience,
can take a long
and struggling time.

Let us say
that to offer
the hardest blessing

we will need
the deepest grace,
that to forgive
the sharpest pain
we will need
the fiercest love,
that to release
the ancient ache
we will need
new strength
for every day.

Let us say
the wound
will not be
our final home;
that through it
runs a road,
a way we would not
have chosen
but on which
we will finally see
forgiveness,
so long practiced,
coming toward us
shining with the joy
so well deserved.

⁶ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/09/09/the-hardest-blessing/>

And I believe that this is true. But I also believe it is true and needs to be said, what forgiveness **does not** mean:⁷

Forgiveness does not mean

Returning to abuse

Allowing hurtful behaviors to continue

Minimizing or Forgetting what has happened

Not all relationships, not all damage can be fixed.

And when that is the case the work of repentance is in living differently,
breaking the cycle.

The faithful process of forgiveness does not eliminate the accountability which might be required.

As Everett McGill in *O Brother Where Art Thou* says after he partner-in-crime Delmar is baptized and proceeds to confess openly to his crimes, expecting to walk away, “Even if it did put you square with the Lord, the state of Mississippi's a little more hardnosed.”⁸

Forgiveness does not remove accountability.

Nelson Mandela forgave his jailers, but he did not stop speaking out against injustice or living his life for justice.⁹

Forgiveness does not erase what has happened, it allows us to live differently into the future.

It is a process. Of moving forward, even if one step is all you can muster. Moving forward.

The photos I saw in the New York Times¹⁰ a couple of years ago were stark. So beautiful and haunting that I cannot ever forget them.

In each there are two individuals, in some sort of pose, together.

They are together, but they are not affectionate.

They are joined, but they are not joyful.

It was a photo essay on Rwanda, in each photo there is a Hutu who was granted pardon by the Tutsi survivor of his crime.

⁷ While I'm not quoting her directly, this section relies heavily on the content and format of Jan Richardson's blogpost footnoted above.

⁸ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190590/quotes>

I'm not including a video clip because if you haven't seen the movie, you should.

⁹ I'm not sure if there is an original source for this sentence, but many people have used very similar words.

¹⁰ Pieter Hugo (photographs) and Susan Dominus (text), “Portraits of Reconciliation: 20 years after the genocide in Rwanda, reconciliation still happens one encounter at a time.” *New York Times Magazine*, April 6, 2014.

<http://nyti.ms/QLpEJ1>

All of the crimes were horrible.

Two people bound together first by those events and now, by forgiveness.

As you read you learn that this did not happen over night. It was over long periods of time, with a great deal of help from facilitators. It happened with truth telling and honesty. And finally with the person who had committed the sin asking for forgiveness, which the one who had been wounded was free to accept or reject.

And where accepted, we are told new relationships have begun.

Cansilde (one of the survivors) said:

“After I was chased from my village and Dominique and others looted it, I became homeless and insane. Later, when he asked my pardon, I said: ‘I have nothing to feed my children. Are you going to help raise my children? Are you going to build a house for them?’ The next week, Dominique came with some survivors and former prisoners.... and they built my family a house. Ever since then, I have started to feel better. I was like a dry stick; now I feel peaceful in my heart, and I share this peace with my neighbors.”

The photos are clear, the past is not forgotten, but neither has a more hopeful future been abandoned, through faith.

It is difficult to comprehend, but even in those horrible circumstances we cannot escape the words of the gospel, words that call, compel us to forgiveness.

What credit is it to you if you love those who love you? Jesus tells us in the gospel of Luke. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven,” (Luke 6:37)

In the gospel of Matthew, when asked how often we should forgive, Jesus says, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:22)

And Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

It started with truth.

It leads to forgiveness.

For the sinners and those who have been sinned against.

Forgiving another.

Forgiving yourself.

Beginning to do the work of transformation that can lead you
to ask for forgiveness from another.

And.....

to end with the beginning, it is all possible because of one thing:

By the grace of God, you are forgiven. We are forgiven.

This journey, your journey is not one you undertake on your own.

You are preceded by Jesus, who, on the cross, forgave.

“Father, Forgive them” (Luke 23:34)

As we journey together, brothers and sisters who hold in common
far more than anything that would identify us as different.

We are all, Children of God.

What do you have to forgive?

What is holding you captive, and waiting for you to be on the journey of release?

For what do you need forgiveness?

To tell the truth about, so tomorrow can be different from today?

What do you need to forgive in yourself to see yourself as God sees you, loved and loveable?

One our way to letting go, releasing, relinquishing.

On our way of forgiveness.

Amen.