

THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY (Doylestown Presbyterian Church)
Matthew 6:7-15
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Let's begin this morning with a thought experiment. Let's imagine a focus group on faith, composed of representatives of many of the Christian churches in America today. They're gathered in a circle, and a moderator poses this question to them: "What's the distinctive feature of your church?"

The Presbyterian goes first because we're always likely to have something to say about everything. "It's the sovereignty of God," the Presbyterian says.

The Catholic says, "It's the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Baptism."

The Baptist says, "It's baptism—but only for adults."

The Methodist says, "It's sanctification—growth in righteousness."

The Fundamentalist says, "It's the belief in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God."

The Lutheran says, "It's justification by faith."

The Pentecostal says, "It's the power of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of speaking in tongues and healing."

The Episcopalian says, "It's our liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer."

The Evangelical says, "It's the experience of being born again—a personal, life-changing experience of Jesus Christ."

That is a sample of the diversity of Christianity in America today. On the one hand, it's exciting and even inspiring because it reveals the richness and complexity of the Christian witness in this nation. It's safe to say that no one of these denominations has the sole truth about the Christian faith; each has a grasp of part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, it's rather depressing. A religion that claims to believe in one Lord and one faith looks more like the fragments of an unsolved jigsaw puzzle than a portrayal of Jesus Christ.

Now consider an insight from Huston Smith. For much of the twentieth century, Professor Smith was one of the foremost historians of world religions. Long before inter-religious dialogue became popular, Huston Smith introduced us to the beliefs of billions of people. His most popular book is The World's Religions, and it has sold more than two million copies.

In one of his writings, Huston Smith declares there are three great traditions that came from the patriarch Abraham—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Each left different legacies that resound throughout the centuries. Judaism, he says, taught us the importance of family. Islam taught us the importance of prayer. And Christianity taught us the importance of forgiveness.

That astonished me! I've spent my adult life studying the history of Christianity. I can cite for you many examples of the intolerance that Christians have shown toward each other and toward people of other faiths, sometimes cruelly and violently. I could point you to our contemporary political life in which Christians differ vehemently about so-called "social issues." Forgiveness hardly seems the mark of Christianity in our world today.

And yet, here is Huston Smith. He says that when you take the long view and the broad perspective, forgiveness is the heart of Christianity.

I believe he is right. Scholars tell us that fully two-thirds of Jesus' teachings deal with the theme of forgiveness. The Sermon on the Mount may give us a summary of living a life devoted to God, but Jesus spent most of his time and energy talking about a God who forgives us and asks us to forgive one another. Indeed, one of his last things he said was: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The Lord's Prayer is the classic example of Christ's teaching. The words, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," come at the very center of the prayer. They're preceded by an acknowledgment of God's holiness and power: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done." The plea for forgiveness lies at the heart of the other intercessions for daily bread and deliverance from temptation and evil. In other words, in the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness isn't the first word or the last word; it's the main word.

In case anyone misses the point, Jesus follows up his model prayer by telling his disciples, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you."

Over the past several years, the subject of forgiveness has been a major issue in my life. Before that, I devoted most of my energy to studying how others understood the Christian faith. Then, because as I grew older and more aware of my frailty and weaknesses, the main point of Christianity—forgiveness—became a personal question, not an academic one. How, I asked, can God forgive me? How can others forgive me?

Now, I can't claim I have definitive answers, but I have discovered two crucial insights.

First, and perhaps most obviously, being forgiven by God and forgiving others are interrelated. These aren't two separate experiences; they're interlocked like the fingers of two hands. We can't know God's forgiveness without forgiving others. But the reverse is also true. We can't forgive others without knowing God's forgiveness of us.

That is more difficult than it seems. Perhaps it's because we really don't think we've done much that is wrong. Some of my minister friends have told me that for their congregations

the most controversial part of the worship service is the confession of sin. I can believe that. As I look out on this congregation, you don't look particularly sinful. Sure, we mess up, but are we messed up? Is there something about us that is basically flawed?

It's hard to admit our shortcomings and defects. Why? It's partly because we think we are in control. We assume that we can handle what life throws at us. We believe that in the last analysis, we know how to live our lives and, for the most part, we do that pretty well. When others frustrate us or anger us, we become resentful. We live with a desire for control we don't acknowledge (look how things could be better around this house or around this office) or an anger and resentment we barely suppress (look what you've done to me). This vicious cycle shuts us down and closes us up so that we live in crates. We can't get out and nobody can get in. It kills us—sometimes physically but always spiritually. There's an old Native American saying that angry people dig two graves—one for the object of their anger and one for themselves.

The only way out of the crate is to admit we can't control others or ourselves and acknowledge we need God's presence in our lives—to forgive what we have done and free us to be what God created us to be. We can't escape from the crate without God breaking through and lifting us up. And once we're out of the crate, we can open the crates we have built for others.

You see, the forgiveness we find we cannot keep. We have to give it away.

The second insight is this: The hardest part about forgiveness is not giving it to others but receiving it for ourselves. Pope John XXIII, who did so much to renew the Catholic Church, once confided to his diary: "The greatest challenge of the spiritual life is not to love but to receive love."

My spiritual adviser, a wise and insightful Catholic priest, gave me that quotation as he guided me toward a deeper understanding of forgiveness. My problem, he saw quite correctly, was that I found it difficult to believe that God's forgiveness was intended for me. I was so caught up in earning forgiveness through repentance, shame, and guilt that I could not see the pardon that God was offering to me. I couldn't quite understand that before I could say I was sorry, God was saying I was forgiven.

When we are forgiven by God, we're given a chance to stop this endless game of trying to do better, failing, apologizing, and going on in the same way. We recognize that we cannot break out of the self-destructive patterns that erode our relationships with others and ourselves. Because of God's embracing, unconditional love, God forgives us, so we can forgive others—and that includes ourselves.

As Pope Francis has said, "Forgiveness isn't a decree. It's a caress."

Forgiveness—the heart of Christianity.

Two points:

One, we are forgiven and therefore free.

Two, we are forgiven and therefore free to forgive others, including ourselves.

Think of how your life would be different if you accepted that. Think of how your relationship with God and others would be transformed if you received that. Think of how people would see the church if we showed that to the world. It's a strategy for mission that beats anything I've ever encountered. It's Christ's plan for the world.

Here's a story from American history and Philadelphia to illustrate this affirmation about the Christian faith. Perhaps you have heard it.

In 1787, more than two hundred thirty years ago, a group of anxious and frightened men gathered here in Philadelphia. The American Revolution was over, but the chaos and instability of the war lived on in the new nation of the United States. They came with their own agendas of how to build a more perfect union, and the result was the set of compromises we know as the Constitution of the United States of America. That document—with remarkably few amendments—became the foundation of our government, and the writing of the Constitution itself is now known as “the Miracle of Philadelphia.”

Toward the end of the grueling negotiations, the aged Benjamin Franklin left what is now called Constitution Hall. As he carefully made his way down the steps, someone shouted to him, “Dr. Franklin, Dr. Franklin, what kind of government do we have?” Franklin responded in a weary voice, “A republic if you can keep it.”

Now imagine having lunch with a friend this week. You haven't seen this person in decades. You mention that you're a member of Doylestown Presbyterian Church, and the person asks, “What kind of church do you have?”

Or maybe, just maybe, the question will be more pointed: “What kind of Christian are you?”

And what would you say?