

## Called to Forgive

[John 20:19-23](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Of all the things Jesus has called to us do, none is more important or more difficult than the call to forgive.

It was Sunday night of the first Easter. The disciples were hiding behind a locked door because they were afraid. They had heard a rumor that Jesus was alive, but they didn't know what to make of that. The only thing they were sure about was that Jesus, their teacher, had been crucified. Since then, apparently, these disciples had been huddled together in fear behind a locked door.

Aren't doors wonderful things? Especially doors with locks. Upon moving into an apartment in South Chicago, my family knew we were in for an interesting time when we saw that the front door had four locks. I remember wondering what the relative benefit was of the third or fourth lock, but soon I discovered the benefit is all emotional. When you got in at night, after being defensive and worried all day long, you could shut the door on the world and turn lots of little levers. "Click, click, click, click." Somehow it made you feel so much better.

As a pastor, I think of that door often when I'm listening to people describe how they cope with their fears. We all keep our hearts behind a door with lots of locks because there is something out there that makes us afraid. If you try to get into someone's heart before you are invited, especially if that heart has been hurt before, you will find that the door is locked tight. For example, a woman tells her date, "We've been going out for six months now, I just wanted to say we seem to be getting close." He goes, "Click, click, click, click," and she's locked out. What is he afraid of? He may not even know, but clearly she is closer than he can handle.

What were the disciples afraid of? I don't think it was just that those who killed Jesus would kill them as well. I think the fear went deeper than that. We are told they were afraid of the Jews. But the disciples were Jews. So they were afraid of their own people. Maybe they were afraid their own people didn't want them anymore, or that they would be scorned and laughed at by the very people they were trying to impress. Maybe they just didn't want everyone to know they had failed. They had even failed at protecting Jesus.

Remember all their bravado in earlier days? I'm sure the disciples were thinking about that as they hid behind the locked doors. They remembered saying, "Jesus, I will never let anyone hurt you. I will never forsake you. You can count on me." But they did forsake Jesus, because they were just too afraid of the cross. I think the disciples were hiding behind a locked door because they were so ashamed.

Shame is our greatest fear and the primary reason why we keep our hearts locked up tightly. We know the truth about ourselves, and the truth is that we are not what we want to be. We are certainly not what we pretend to be.

Garrison Keillor has said, "We always have a backstage view of ourselves." We only let the audience see the neatly arranged stage. But behind the curtain there are all kinds of things lying around: old failures, hurts, guilt, and lots of shame. It is also backstage that we go for those last minute make-ups before we walk in front of the curtain again. If someone were to walk behind the curtain or if, God forbid, the curtain were to fall, everyone would see the truth about your life. You would feel so ashamed.

We sometimes hear that we are now living in a shameless society, and that people no longer feel such an emotion. But I don't believe that for a minute. Shame continues to be the great plague to our souls. Psychologists tell us that shame sweeps over us when we overstep our abilities or when our fantasy about who we would like to be encounters the backstage reality of who we really are. Thus, shame is not just guilt about what we did, it is also about what we have failed to do. Namely, we have failed to be who we pretend to be.

When psychologists say things like this, I think they have read the third chapter of Genesis. Striving to "be like God," Adam and Eve reached for more than they were created to have. That is at the core of their sin. And our sin. We have reached for the god-like ability to create our own lives but are ashamed that we have failed. And like Adam and Eve in our shame, we then try in vain to cover up our naked vulnerability.

Nothing is more crippling to our souls, because now covering our shame has become the agenda of life. Now we are always locking up more and more doors, sealing off more and more rooms of the heart to prevent our true selves from being discovered. We think we are keeping the world out, but in fact we are keeping ourselves locked in. And we are not free.

This is why, at the center of the Gospel, is the proclamation that in Jesus Christ, God has come looking for us. According to our text today, he walks right through the locked door to find us. He shows us his wounds from the cross, the marks of our forgiveness. Then he says, "Peace be with you." There it is. That's the Gospel! In Jesus Christ you are forgiven, peace is restored to your troubled soul, and you are free.

Have you ever noticed how many times in the gospels someone is brought to Jesus who is sick or crippled. And in healing them Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." We want to ask, "Why does he say that?" It is not because sickness is always caused by sin, but because it is shame that has actually crippled all of us. Until the shame is removed by forgiveness, we are not free to enjoy the grace of life.

The word for forgiveness in Greek can even be translated, "to free," or "to let go." Thus, the gospel story in a person's life is always a freedom story. To those whose sin was obvious and who had been cast out of community because of shame, Jesus kept saying things like, "Your sins are forgiven." It was another way of saying, "Stop pretending to be deserving of shame. Be free. Be restored." To those, like the Pharisees, who were able to keep the pretense of self righteousness going and who kept a good show going in front of the curtain, Jesus said, "You must repent." It was another way of saying, "Stop pretending you can cover up the shame." So to all of us Jesus says, "Just stop pretending."

When I was serving as the pastor of another church, a member of the church broke into the choir room one day during worship and stole my wife's purse. She looked enough like Annie to use her driver's license for identification when writing bad checks all over town. She had stolen an identity and was pretending to be someone she was not.

It is not unlike what all of us try to do in presenting ourselves as something we are not. We write resumes and applications to schools pretending to be smarter than we are. We go into business meetings and sales calls pretending we can deliver more than we can. We go out on dates pretending to look better than we do. We come to church pretending to be more religious than we are. And all the time we try to manage the shame of not being what we look like.

When the police finally caught this woman who had been pretending to be Anne, she was exposed and the shame was now overwhelming to her. She thought she was finished. But at the church we knocked ourselves out to keep her in the fellowship. The turning point in her life came during a communion service when she took her place in the line of people coming forward to the table. Through the intervention of the Holy Spirit when it came time for her to commune, the only station open was the one where Annie was serving. As she sheepishly walked up to the woman she had hurt, I saw the miracle of forgiveness and freedom unfolding. The only words Anne said, the only words that needed to be said were, "The body of Christ."

The victim had become a priest, administering the shame evaporating grace of Jesus Christ. And two women found their freedom. One was freed of shame, and the other of hurt.

After finding the disciples, forgiving them and restoring peace to their souls, Jesus then gave them the Holy Spirit and the ministry of grace. He said to them, and to us, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This is an amazing calling, that you have received! Essentially what Jesus is doing is entrusting you with his own ministry of forgiving sins.

Now, I know that some of you have suffered some great hurts in life, hurts that are a whole lot greater than having a purse stolen. Some of you have had your hearts broken, others have had their jobs stolen, or lost loved ones to drunk drivers, or lost your ability to trust others. That's why you've got your hearts locked up behind the door. But that only makes it all the more critical that you respond to Jesus' calling to forgive, because in the words of Lewis Smedes, "When you forgive, you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you."

If you do not forgive those who hurt you, the only alternative Jesus has left is to retain the sins. To retain means to hold, and why in the world do you want to hold onto hurt? That is to hold onto the identity of victim.

According to Jesus you can be either a priest or a victim. That's it. Those are your only options when you are hurt. What you cannot do is just forget about the hurt, or deny it, or store it up to use later. To be a priest is to free others of shame and yourself of hurt. To be a victim is to hold on to hurt, which is like holding on to a disease. It will eat up your soul. It doesn't matter what you do, or how hard you try, you are never going to have a better past. So isn't it time to stop dwelling on it? Isn't it time to stop being a victim? We need you to be a priest.

There are so many things we can do for ourselves in the spiritual life. We can read the Bible, pray, and even worship on our own. But when it comes to hearing that we are forgiven, we need a priest. That's your calling -- declaring the absolution of sins.

I know that when the hurts are great, it is hard to be the priest. You wonder, "How can I ever get to the place of giving up such overwhelming hurt?" Remember that you are not on your own for this. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit before he called us to forgive. The work of the Spirit is to bind us into the work of Jesus Christ.

What this means is that you are not called to produce forgiveness. You are called to be the priest pronouncing that which has been produced on the cross. You are called to open the locks and throw open the door, and walk back into the world as a priest who is unafraid. The only alternative is to live in the smaller and smaller prisons called hurt.

Lord God, we will never be able to forgive until we first believe that we are forgiven. So break through our locked defenses and free us of the fear of being ashamed. Free us to serve as your grateful priests pronouncing forgiveness to those dying of shame. Amen.