CIRCLES OF FORGIVENESS: FORGIVING OURSELVES!

By Nancy S. Cushman

Psalm 139:1-18

February 4, 2018 North Scottsdale UMC

# SETTING THE CONTEXT

 The psalm I’m going to read is a song of relationship. In some of the most beautiful poetic images in Scripture, (at least in my opinion) the psalmist describes the intimate relationship between the Creator and God’s human creations. We are known completely, even that which is secret is known by God. The psalmist is not afraid of that intimacy, in the psalm he opens himself to it and praises God for it. The psalm is attributed to King David. David was far from perfect, yet he continually repented and turned back to God. He continually opened himself to that intimacy with God.

Read Psalm 139:1-18

# THE SERMON

 Lynn was about seven and his brother, Alan, was five. The two of them were having another one of their knock down drag out fights. Mom was in another part of the house and either didn’t hear them or ignored them as the fight raged. The bathroom was the one room that had a locking door, and so it became a safe refuge in times like this. Lynn ran into the bathroom slamming the door and then Alan screamed. Lynn assumed his brother was just howling with rage and continued to push on the door not realizing that Alan’s finger had been caught in the door jamb. By the time he realized there was something more, he had seriously injured his brother’s finger. Mom rushed them to the hospital where Alan was given a shot and his finger was bandaged. It wasn’t broken, but his knuckle was severely bruised, and the skin was split open. **Lynn said, “I was so sorry. Even though Alan accepted my apology, I’ve never forgotten the incident and I have never forgiven myself!”** Much later in life, Lynn turned that memory into this cartoon.[[1]](#endnote-1) (click to see cartoon <https://fborfw.com/strip_fix/sunday-january-28-2018>.) How many of us have done things we regret? How many of us are carrying the weight of a regret?

 Over the last month, we’ve been talking about circles of forgiveness. God has given us a process for letting go of the wounds and hurts that weigh us down. Rev. Len Sweet calls it a “sacrament for failure.” I really like that name because we all fail at times; we all miss the mark. **Confession, repentance and forgiveness is the Divine answer for failure; the sacrament for failure.** We have talked about forgiveness and our inner circle, those people we are closest to like our parents, siblings, spouses, significant others, children. Last week, Pastor Stuart talked about forgiveness and our outer circle, people we may not see every day, but who affect us, like fellow church members. **Today, I want to draw the circle back into the center and look at forgiving ourselves.** For some of us, this is the hardest forgiveness to give. Many of us allow that others can be imperfect and we offer forgiveness, but we hold ourselves to the impossible standard of perfection and when we miss it, our judgment is much harsher.

 When Adam Hamilton asked his congregation about forgiveness, this is what one member told him, *“I struggle almost daily. I can see how God works in others' lives, but in my own, I struggle. I know that God loves me no matter what I've done or been in my life, but to really feel it at the core of my being, I struggle."* **The founder of our denomination, John Wesley, had the same struggle.** Wesley, was methodical in the practice of his faith. He wrote in code in journals his entire life and he was so honest in writing down his experiences and thoughts, that when the code was broken after his death, we can learn so much about him, his faith and his experience of God. Wesley went to Georgia as a missionary and had had some painful and disastrous experiences there. When he returned to England, he was wounded, his confidence was shaken, and while he knew about salvation intellectually, he didn’t feel it. He even questioned whether he should continue to preach. One evening he really didn’t want to go to a group meeting taking place on Aldersgate Street, but he went anyway. They were reading Luther's preface to the Letter to the Romans and during that meeting, he described feeling “his heart strangely warmed.” He finally came to truly trust in Christ’s saving grace and felt that love and forgiveness. It changed his life and his preaching.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**There may be some people who refuse to see and admit their failures, who push that blame off on others. Of course, this is foolish because it ensures there will be no change and it denies God the ability to heal us and help us grow**. **I think there are a lot more of us who know very well our weaknesses and who have a hard time forgiving ourselves.** Family therapists Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas talk about our ideal self-image and our real self. **When we don’t live up to that ideal we get angry at ourselves, and that anger is often expressed through implosion or explosion, turning it inward or outward.** When we explode, we can damage our relationships with others. When we implode, we damage ourselves.[[3]](#endnote-3) Anybody have that critic voice that berates you when you think you’ve messed up? It says things we’d never take from someone else, “how can you be so stupid? \_\_\_\_\_ is really mad at you now, they won’t like you anymore,” etc. This self-anger doesn’t improve the situation. **The healthy biblical way to process that anger is confession- admit to yourself what you did that was unwise, wrong or hurtful, apologize to the people you have wronged and seek to make amends, if that’s appropriate, and then they recommend consciously apologizing to yourself and choosing to forgive yourself**. They say this requires self-talk which can be done aloud or silently. It is silencing that critical voice by choosing grace, mercy and forgiveness.

My husband, George loves to sing a song called “See Me Beautiful.” The words are “see me beautiful, look for the best in me. It’s who I really am and who I want to be. It may take some time, it may be hard to find but see me beautiful.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Psalm 139 reminds us that we are beautifully made, God wove us together in our mother’s womb. God knows us- completely. God knows us even better than we know ourselves and God loves us. “*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there, if I go to the place of the dead, you are there. If I go to the farthest limits, you are there*.” (Psalm 139:7-9) **If God, who knows us completely and is with us always, loves us offering us mercy and forgiveness, can’t we offer it to ourselves?** If the God of the universe is willing to forgive us, isn’t it a little arrogant withhold it from ourselves?

There may be times when we can just make the choice and forgive ourselves. I started flying over to California every week to attend seminary when the girls were very young. I was gone two days a week and one night. My biggest worry going into ministry was hurting my family. I struggled with lots of guilt over leaving the girls. I think God tried to help me with it. The topic of my first Bible class was trusting God with what is most precious to us, like Abraham trusted God with Isaac. My four-year-old Sarah did not take well to me leaving her. One day when I had to leave, she had a complete meltdown, clinging to my leg crying and pleading for me to not go. She hit every pang of guilt full throttle. I left devastated. In fact, I was so distracted and upset that I locked the car door and left the car running for two days in the airport parking. I had to talk to myself and look at the blessing that they were receiving in their special time with their daddy. I had to tell myself to trust God with what was most precious to me. **I had to forgive myself for making things a little harder on them and failing to live up to my ideal of the perfect mother.** I was able to do that trusting that God and George could care for our girls just fine.

Sometimes we have other guilts and wounds, whether deserved or undeserved, that are harder to forgive. **It may take a more formal process to forgive ourselves. For those times, Chapman and Thomas encourage us to write out our self-apologies including our languages of apology (those are expressing regret, making things right or restitution, genuinely repenting (changing your behavior), requesting forgiveness and accepting responsibility).**[[5]](#endnote-5) Then taking what we’ve written, stand in front of a mirror and speak it aloud to yourself. I know it may sound a little weird, but if more subtle approaches haven’t worked; it’s worth a try.

Here’s an example of the self-apology they gave:

“*Say your name*, it and how much I regret what I did. I have learned my lesson. *Your name*, I want to give myself the freedom to be happy again. And *your name,* I want to ask you to forgive me and to help me make the most of my life in the future.”

The example of the self-forgiveness statement is:

“*Your name*, the offense you committed has troubled me greatly. It has brought me much inner anxiety and has weighed me down with regret. But I have heard your sincere apology and I value you. Therefore, *your name,* I choose to forgive you. I will no longer hold the offense against you. I will do everything I can to make our future bright. Let me say it again, *your name,* I forgive you.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

**When we forgive ourselves we no longer hold the offense against ourselves**. Of course, we may wish it had never happened, but you can’t change the past; we can only learn from it and move on. Choosing to forgive oneself removes the distance between the ideal self and the real self. We look at us through the eyes of God who knows us completely and chooses to love us even though we are imperfect, even though we miss the mark (that’s the literal meaning of sin). **Forgiving ourselves does not condone our offense or remove all the pain or memories of it, nor does it necessarily remove the consequences of it, but it does allow us to learn from it, grow and let go of the weight of it, so we are free to make the most of the future.** With God’s help and the power of forgiveness our failures don’t have to be a finish line, they can become a starting line.[[7]](#endnote-7) Amen.

1. Lynn Johnston. For Better or For Worse website: <https://fborfw.com/strip_fix/sunday-january-28-2018>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Telford. The Life of John *Wesley*. Wesley Center online. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/?id=89>, Chapter 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas. *When Sorry Isn’t Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love*. (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2013.) p 144-147. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “See Me Beautiful.” Song by Red and Kathy Grammer. (Smilin’ Atcha Mucis, Inc.: 1986). Listen on <https://www.redgrammer.com/index.php/see-me-beautiful-song.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas talk about the languages of apology in their book, *When Sorry Isn’t Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love.*” I also have a sermon series about them at <http://www.nsumc.com/forgiveness.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chapman and Thomas, p. 145-146. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The metaphor is from Starting Over: A 5-Day Devotional on Learning to Love Your Regrets. Day 2 devotion “Recognize Your Regrets” a plan on the Youversion Bible app. You can download the app at <https://www.youversion.com/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)