



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Practicing Forgiveness

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 23, 2014
The Third Sunday in Lent—Based on Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42*

Welcome to Wednesday in Lent! That's right, the third week of Lent is over-the-hump week. We will pass the midway point between Ash Wednesday and Easter Eve on Thursday. This is when Lent gets hard and it is a good time to review our Lenten practice. How is it working out? Are you feeling all defeated, as I have for many years, because before the ashes were washed off my forehead I had reverted to old ways of being, acting, or eating? If we are experiencing failure and feeling defeated or if we are feeling all self righteous, we have missed the point of having a Lenten observance. At the beginning of Lent the Prayer Book reminds us that in the early Church the season of Lent was a time of penitence and fasting during which the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the gospel of our Savior, and of the need, which all Christians continually have, to renew their repentance and faith.

Truth be told—not the whole truth but the edited-for-the-sermon version of the truth—I cheated twice in the second week of Lent. Both times I was in a meeting and I am not always at my best in meetings. Most times there is nothing I can do and so I eat. The first time, the cookies were right in front of me—they were oatmeal raisin cookies, and I do not even like oatmeal raisin cookies—and I ate them. The second time they were actually behind me and they were Keebler fudge stripe cookies, my favorite. And since I had already broken my promise, what real difference did it make? And so the rationalizations began to pile up like Girl Scout cookies calling out my name, begging me to take just one more box to help an enterprising young woman.

I began to notice how easily I think of reasons and rationalizations, especially when the reasons focus me on me. In fact there have been years when all that focus on me has led me to abandon the observance of Lent altogether. The problem was that with all those rationalizations in front of me it was hard to think anything else. All I could think about was that I had failed once again, and then more excuses came and then more failure. Somehow this never worked. I never got better at keeping Lent. It never made me a more loving person. This year it finally occurred to me that it would have been much easier to seek forgiveness for my broken promise and recommit myself to keeping my word.

And so I forgave myself, and that was pretty easy. I did not ask myself to do anything in the way of penance. I just forgave myself and recommitted not to eat cookies again during Lent. Then my inner religious nut job started questioning the validity of my forgiving myself and said that he thought that I might have been extending myself some type of false mercy or cheap grace. But then I remembered that mercy is of God and can never be false, and grace is also of God and it is never cheap.

Indeed look at the stories from the scripture that we read today. The sinners in both stories are not asked to repent or even say they were sorry. In the first lesson from Exodus the people of Israel are thirsty. Camped where there is no water they begin to complain to Moses and against Moses and they gossip among themselves. The complaint becomes so severe that Moses goes before God to do some complaining of his own. Did you

notice that in the story no one goes to look for water? This is a great example of the way in which it is so much easier to focus on what we don't have and complain about that than it is to take action, to do something constructive about our situation. God doesn't wait for the people of Israel or Moses to realize the error of their ways and repent. God takes action. More accurately, he tells Moses to take action and the people have water.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus surprises the woman of Samaria by engaging her in conversation and then by knowing who she is and giving her something to believe in that is so much bigger than she is that she forgets herself and runs to tell others. He doesn't make any specific demands of repentance or ask her for promises of good behavior in the future. Instead, she is transformed by her encounter with the forgiving presence of Jesus, and her transformation frees her to effectively announce the Good News to others. The narrator notes, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'" So when the Samaritans come to him, they ask him to stay with them; and he stays there two days. And many more believe because of his word. They say to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." The Samaritans come out because of the woman's testimony but believe because of Jesus' word. Effectively he has transformed her from a pariah into a prophet in her community. The Samaritan woman has gone from being someone without credibility to being someone with credibility. That is the power of forgiveness.

It has been said that forgiveness is nothing more and nothing less than giving up the right to resent. Giving up the right to resent is important because as Nelson Mandela said, paraphrasing one of the sayings attributed to the Buddha, "Holding on to resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemies."

Now back to the cookies. If I can stop resenting myself for breaking my Lenten promise to myself and allow myself a clean slate to start over without explanations, without excuses and rationalizations, perhaps I can keep my word and live as a more powerful witness to God's love. And perhaps with practice in forgiving myself and others for small things I could begin to forgive myself and others for much larger things. The interesting thing is that in giving up the right to resent you stop worrying about the past, the reasons, the rationalizations, and the excuses; and you free yourself to be bigger than your failures and bigger than your resentments over the failures of others. Forgiveness frees us to put the past in the past where it belongs. Forgiveness frees us to believe the promises of God. Forgiveness frees us to love.

Henri Nouwen wrote that "Forgiveness is the name of love, practiced among people who love poorly." He goes on to say that, "The hard truth is that all of us love poorly and we need to forgive and be forgiven, every day, every hour unceasingly." So it is mid-Lent, a good time to remember the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel and recommit ourselves to the observance of a holy Lent. No matter what your personal practice is, try forgiving yourself. Try forgiving others over and over and over again, and experience the freedom to love. Remember that the past is forgiven and the future is in God's loving and forgiving hands.