



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## The past is forgiven and the future is in God's hands.

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 1, 2017*

*The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ—Based on Luke 2: 15-21*

It has been said that the past is forgiven and the future is in God's hands.

This has been a hard thing for me to live by. If I truly believed that the past is forgiven and the future is in God's hands, I would be left with only the present moment. Imagine that.

I want it to be true, and yet I find it hard to feel forgiven. And because of that, it is hard for me to forgive others. And so I drag the past around with me, and when I try to see what the future holds, the only thing I can see is the past that I carry. The idea of living in the present moment is not hard for me alone. Many people, some of you gathered here this morning, have told me that you hold on to the past like I do. You have dragged it with you so long that it is all that you can see. This is a problem for organizations as well as individuals. As the Church, we also drag our collective past around with us, and then we wonder why life always looks the same as the past. We have little hope to offer and few people join us.

On Christmas Day, the *New York Times* published a [Nicholas Kristof interview](#) with the popular New York evangelical preacher Tim Keller. In the article Kristof asks Keller if he, Kristof, is a Christian. Specifically, Kristof points out all things that he finds difficult to believe about the biblical narratives concerning Jesus' birth, resurrection and miracles. Keller's response was "Jesus' teaching was not the main point of his mission. He came to save people through his death for sin and his resurrection. So, his important ethical teaching only makes sense when you don't separate it from these historic doctrines." I completely disagree. If this were true, the teachings of Jesus could not be understood until the Church developed these historic doctrines or narratives to explain what Jesus meant. Furthermore, to be honest, I am more interested in what Jesus taught us about God than I am in what the church teaches me about Jesus.

I imagine that the idea of developing narratives is not strange to any of us; it certainly is something with which I am familiar. Ask me about almost anything that I have done wrong or that has been done wrong to me and I can explain it, if you will only listen. If you do listen and if you enter into the story I have created to justify and rationalize my choices and behaviors, you will know a lot about me but very little about what happened. Another way these types of narratives work is if I can find no narrative that explains my actions: the action just reinforces the narrative that I tell myself all the time about how bad I am and I will never get better. And because I tell myself either or both of these two types of narratives, they collapse into what really happened, and I tell them so often they actually become me. And then I cannot stop telling myself these narratives, because internally I am afraid that to lose the narrative, I would be losing a part of myself.

The same thing happens with Church doctrines or any other narratives that we have used to become who we are today. In the Church, we have done something wrong and feel ourselves separated from the love of God or neighbor or just have trouble following the teaching, and so we engrave a narrative into our common life and call it a doctrine. We tell the doctrines to others and insist that they must believe them to be part of who we are. We get so far into the story that we cannot stop telling ourselves, because if we do we are sure that we will lose a part of ourselves. And that is why some people, maybe most people, find the doctrines more important than the actual teachings of Jesus.

It seems to me that we as Christians—or as our Presiding Bishop likes to say, members of the Anglican branch of the Jesus movement—we should be trying to follow Jesus and his teachings rather than making up stories that try to explain the teachings. The specific teachings that Jesus taught that scholars tell us were unique to him are all the hard ones. Love your enemies, forgive those who do wrong to you, turn the other cheek, forgive others that you might be forgiven. These teachings may seem hard to carry out and yet they are not hard to understand. Even non-Christian critics of our faith, like the comedian Bill Maher, point out that loving one's enemies is at the core of Christianity. He says, "If you are a Christian and rejoice (as many Christians did after the death of Osama bin Laden) in revenge, torture, and war, you are not really a Christian. You cannot say you are a follower of the guy who said love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. If you ignore what Jesus taught," he says, "you are not Christian; you are in the end just auditing. You are not followers of Jesus; you are just fans."

In order to forgive our enemies and do good to those who hate us, we must learn to separate our narratives, our explanations, and stories from what really happened. These narratives lead to the conclusion that if we don't somehow protect ourselves from ourselves or from others, create a boundary, and even punish the one we blame for our actions, then we will never be safe and continue to be hurt.

We are told this morning in the letter to the Philippians that Christ Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." You could say he left behind the stories, the narratives of divinity that told him who he was, and lived among us as one who was able to live as one whose past was really in the past and one who believed that the future is in God's hands. By doing that he was able to live in the moment without regret, fear, or anxiety and was free to love and be loved. And because of that, the name of Jesus, as our prayer for the day points out, became the sign of our salvation.

The author of the book *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* which has been made into a play now showing at the Public Theater, Cheryl Strayed has written that "acceptance asks only that you embrace what's true." Accepting what is true and separating that from the story we have about what is true make us able to forgive. Strayed also points out that "forgiveness means you've found a way forward that acknowledges harm done and hurt caused without letting either your anger or your pain rule your life or define your relationship with the one who did you wrong." Nelson Mandela put it this way: Forgiveness is giving up the right to resent the things that others, even our oppressors, have done to us.

When we live this way, knowing that the past is forgiven and the future is in God's hands, we experience transformation. We are left with only the present moment with hearts full of love and curiosity about what comes next. We live life like Jesus did, as if the Kingdom of God was not in heaven, something we have to earn, but rather as Jesus taught us that the kingdom of heaven is right here right now. And so my friends as they say life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the journey with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind.

Happy New Year!

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