

We are nearing the end of this epic, sizzlin' summer sermon series on the Apostle's Creed.

Our clause for the day, the 'forgiveness of sins' doesn't just appear out of nowhere. As was celebrated last Sunday, the gift of forgiveness comes as part of the Holy Spirit's work within the fabric of Christian community. Forgiveness is a trademark of the communion of saints, a living part of what it is to be holy. Forgiveness is a gift of God we receive and pass along; it is not to be held tightfisted... it is an ongoing part of the work of being human; a gift to be shared.

Now I haven't been looking at every part of the Apostle's Creed this way, but my best guess is that there have been more books written about Forgiveness than any other article of the Creed. Everyone has experienced forgiveness one way or another, (and not everyone has experienced the Resurrection of the Body, at least not yet!) There are more 'angles' to forgiveness than we can possibly count.

So this morning I'll approach this sermon a little differently than usual. I'll share three stories with you about forgiveness; three different perspectives about this very multifaceted gift that we receive and share... beginning with a pretty remarkable story; an interesting parallel to our New Testament lesson from Mark's gospel.

Reynolds Price was a middle-aged professor at Duke University, an English professor and a critically acclaimed novelist. Some years back, I took a Continuing Education workshop with him at Duke.

He had a productive, successful academic career. Life was good. Then one day he received some grim news.

The Doctor told him that there was an 8-inch tumor wrapped around his spine. No operation could be guaranteed to fully remove it. Physicians agreed he would not have more than 18 months to live. The pain grew until it was devastating.

He went through months of debilitating treatments, physical therapy and a slew of remedies that attempted to relieve his pain. He began to pray and read the Bible, although he noted that he didn't find any quick relief. Then one day he had a vision, and it caught him off guard. He taught at a Methodist University but by his own admission, he was a

part-time Protestant. In his vision, Price saw himself by the Sea of Galilee and Jesus summoned him. They waded out into the water. He writes, "Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back until water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke, once, 'Your sins are forgiven,' and turned to shore, done with me. I came on behind him, thinking in my standard greedy fashion, 'It's not my sins I'm worried about.' So to Jesus' receding back I had the gall to say, 'Am I also cured?' He turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words, 'That too.' Then he climbed from the water, not looking around, really done with me. I followed him out and then with no palpable seam in the texture of time and place, I was home again in my wide bed."*

Reynolds Price was never fully physically healed. His cancer eventually diminished due to treatments, but he remained in a wheelchair the rest of his life.

You might ask, "What did Professor Price get out of that experience?" A few years after this incident he wrote, "I am still fully filled with gratitude." The vision he experienced erased any superstitious feelings he had that his sickness came as a punishment, or that he was in any way deserving of it, for he heard Jesus say he was forgiven. This experience held him close to the heart of God even when his illness threatened to tear him away.

The point is, Reynolds Price didn't just get something. He got something back. Some piece of his life was given back and restored by the presence of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness was the key to his restoration. That's the first story...

Our second story is a bit of a history lesson. Like so many things in life, there is an important backstory for this very familiar part of the creed, and it's one you are likely not familiar with (which makes it all the more important to tell.)

This story is also somewhat political in nature, borne out of a combination of compassion and Imperial Roman policy.

The phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' was not part of the first version of the creed, and was later added in the mid-4th century, for reasons that make plenty of sense and still impact us today.

It was a time when the forgiveness of sins was a political issue. In a time shortly after the worst of the persecutions of Christians under the Roman Emperors Diocletian and

Galerius, suddenly and unexpectedly, the new Emperor, Constantine, was converted to Christianity.

The persecutions quickly ended and it soon became customary, even mandatory to become a Christian.

Not everyone in all the empire celebrated this new state of affairs. Some things were easier to forgive than others.

The persecution of Christians across the Empire had been uneven and varied. In some places Christians had been tolerated and other places they suffered severely for their faith. In North Africa the persecutions were harsh. Believers were asked to give up their scriptures, prayers and practices, at the point of death. Some decided to be martyred, some recanted their faith. After Constantine's conversion, all were to be forgiven, regardless of their past history- (that's what forgiveness is all about.)

Although this is sound theology, it's easier said than done. A notable leader of a group in North Africa, named Donatus, decided that he could not worship with other 'fallen' Christians, rejected the others tainted by sin and created a following of his own, a more 'pure' people, or so he said, creating one of the earliest schisms of the early church. In response to the action, when word got back to the Emperor, the phrase "the forgiveness of sins" was added to the Creed and was made part of the core confessional statements of our common Christian faith.

Yet as much as Constantine wanted to mandate forgiveness, even to make it compulsory, it was an impossible gift to legislate.

Forgiveness was now in the books, as it were- how it continues to work its way into human hearts is often makes very interesting and compelling story....

And so is this final illustration. It comes from 'The Book of Forgiving', written by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho. It is an anthology of stories of Forgiveness that come from a wide range of sources, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and many other powerful examples.

I need first to refer to our bulletin cover illustration today, diagramming the fourfold path of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process. We must be able to tell the story, to name the hurt, to grant forgiveness and release or renew the relationship. It takes all four steps for this process to be complete.



This story is about Kelley Connor, who was not at liberty to talk about what she did, and it affected her life in more ways than she ever could have imagined.

When she was 17, she was driving herself to work in the family car from her home in Perth, Australia. It was going to be a good day. It was her younger sister's birthday and they were going to celebrate later that evening.

On the way to work that day, Kelly accidentally hit and killed

seventy-year old Margaret Healy as she was crossing the street.

She was driving too fast up a hill, and as the road crested she was looking into the rearview mirror- instead of straight ahead. Too late with the brakes, she slammed into the older woman. It was an accident, but she was fully responsible. She was at fault, but the police wouldn't let her tell them the true story of what had happened.

"How fast were you going?" – the policeman asked.

"I'm not sure, but probably 42 miles an hour. I was going too fast." Kelly said.

"Do you know the speed limit?" the policeman asked.

"Thirty-five miles an hour."

"Then how fast were you going?" He asked again.

"Probably 42 miles an hour." Kelly said again, this time a bit confused.

He sighed, asking again..."What is the speed limit?"

“Thirty-five miles an hour.”

“Then how fast were you travelling?”

Kelly says that she really didn’t know what to say. Was he asking her to lie?

“I was going thirty-five miles an hour,” she finally said.

“Good”, said the policeman. Then he began to write up the citation that would not lead to her imprisonment.

After she returned home that night, Kelly’s mother passed an edict that said that the whole family would have to live the rest of their lives as if the event never happened and told Kelly that she was forbidden to ever speak of it again. Ever.

After the news passed, and nothing happened to her, she began to live in fear that it would all catch up to her. Her anxiety kept building through months and even years that someone was going to come and take her away, where she deserved, to be locked up. She had recurring dreams that led to nightmares and continued insomnia.

She didn’t think she was worthy to have a life because she had taken a life. There was no safe place to go and no safe person to turn to.

Her family began to fall apart. Shame, dread, guilt, pain all built up around them. As she later said, her entire family began to die the day she hit and killed Margaret. Her mother stopped talking to anyone, her father moved away.

Her friendships died, her youth died, her future died. The only person who knew her pain was the woman she killed.

The police and her parents wouldn’t punish her, and they wouldn’t speak the truth, so she began to shrivel up. She kept her shame and her secret for decades, and it nearly killed her.

It took her nearly thirty years to admit the wrong and break the silence imposed by her mother on that tragic day. After lengthy therapy, once she was able to speak about it, she was also able to make space for her own anguish, ask for forgiveness, and finally, release the relationship.

Today Kelly lives in London and writes and speaks publically about forgiveness. Her book, *To Cause a Death*, recounts her journey from silence to self-forgiveness.

Her life was forever altered not just by taking a life, but also by her inability to tell the story, to name the hurt, to receive some measure of forgiveness and to be able to release the relationship that tormented her so.

Kelly's story is important for us, I believe, because forgiveness all begins on the inside. And, as we know, forgiveness of oneself is the hardest of all the forgivenesses.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free. When we forgive ourselves, we discover how important it is that we ourselves are no longer prisoners of our own complicit silence.

Dear friends in Christ, be assured that there is one thing that we all can be totally certain of, now and always, and that is in God's promises of love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus our Lord, given for us and our salvation. Amen.

*Holy God, I want to be willing to forgive
but I do not know if I want to ask for the will to forgive,
for I may not be ready.
I am not ready for my heart to soften,
I am not ready to be vulnerable again,
not ready to see that there is humanity in the eyes of another
or that the one who hurt me may also have cried.
I am not yet ready for the journey.
I am not yet ready to be committed to the path.
I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness.
Grant me the will to want to forgive,
grant it to me, not yet, but soon.
Can I even form the words,
'Forgive Me'?
Do I dare to see the hurt that I have caused?*

*Is there a place where we can meet? You and me,
the place in the middle, the no man's land,
where we straddle the lines;
where you are right
and I am right, too, and both of us are wrong and wronged.
Can we meet there?
And look for the place where the path begins,
the path that ends when we forgive...*

(A Prayer by Desmond and Mpho Tutu)

* [A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing](#), by Reynolds Price