

In the village of Faken in innermost Friesland there lived a long thin baker named Fouke – a righteous man with a long, thin chin and a long, thin nose. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness over everyone who came near him, so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

On the other hand, Fouke’s wife, Hilda, was short and round. She did not keep people at bay. Instead, her soft roundness seemed to invite them closer to share the warm cheer of her open heart. Now, Hilda respected her husband and loved him, too – as much as he let her – but her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness. And there, in her need, lay the seed of sadness. One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger lying with Hilda in his bed.

Hilda’s adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the Faken congregation. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, Fouke could not forgive Hilda. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings were angry and hard. He hated her for betraying him after he had been such a good, faithful husband. He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy.

Well, Fouke’s fakery did not sit well in heaven. So each time Fouke nursed his grudge toward Hilda, an angel came and dropped a pebble into Fouke’s heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain like the pain he felt when he came in upon Hilda with the stranger. Thus, he hated her all the more. His hate brought pain, his pain made him hate, the pebbles multiplied, and Fouke’s heart grew very heavy with the weight of them – so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

Then one night the angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to Fouke and told him how he could be healed of his hurt. There was one remedy, the angel said, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. Fouke needed the miracle of the magic eyes. He needed eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who had betrayed him, but as a vulnerable woman who had needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday.

Fouke protested. “Nothing can change the past,” he said. “Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change.” “Yes, poor hurting man, you are right,” the angel said. “You cannot change the past. You can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can only heal it with the vision of the magic eyes.”

“So how can I get your magic eyes?” Fouke pouted. “Only ask,” said the angel, “desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your heart.”

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his grudge. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked. And the angel gave. Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke’s eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as an imperfect woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who had betrayed him. The angel kept his promise. He lifted the pebbles from Fouke’s heart, one by one. Though it took a long time to take them all away, Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter. He began to walk straight again. And somehow, his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before. Then at last, he invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began a journey into their second season of humble joy.

This parable by Lewis Smedes* sheds a different light on Jesus’ command to forgive. It shows us how forgiveness benefits everyone – not just the guilty party, but also the injured party; in fact, maybe the injured party even more. For the truth is: however hard it may be to forgive, refusing to forgive is still harder...on us. Carrying a grudge weighs down the heart. Nursing a grudge poisons the soul. And rehearsing a grudge – reminding ourselves how badly someone hurt us, and how awful they were – well, that just inflicts the wound again and again, doesn’t it? More to the point, we just inflict the wound again and again on ourselves. Which isn’t very smart. Or helpful! Or conducive to spiritual growth! That is why Jesus commands us to forgive. This is not an arbitrary command. It grows out of Jesus’ love for us, out of concern for our well-being. And that is why it is not a negotiable command, either. Jesus doesn’t say you should forgive, you ought to forgive, or it’s best to forgive. He says, **“You must forgive.”** And that is the assumption behind this fifth petition. We expect Jesus to forgive us by grace alone. He expects us to forgive others the same way. **“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”**

That said, it’s worth asking what exactly forgiveness means. And let’s first be clear what it does not mean. To forgive someone does not mean what they did was okay. We say that sometimes. *“Oh, that’s okay.”* But it’s not true. If what they did were okay, it wouldn’t require forgiveness. Understanding perhaps, or patience, but not forgiveness. You only forgive something that was wrong.

Just to illustrate the difference, let me tell a story on myself. My best friend in high school came from Greece, and his mom practically adopted me as a son. So when I came home from my first semester in college, she invited me over for dinner. Now, as a theology major, I had started studying ancient Greek, so I thought it might be nice after dinner to pay her a compliment in Greek: “Ti megale vroma!” which I thought meant, “What a great meal!” Unfortunately, I didn’t realize that the meaning of the word “vroma” had changed over time. In modern

Greek it no longer means “meal.” It means “garbage” or “stench.” So you can imagine the look on everyone’s face! Quickly, my friend asked me, “What are you trying to say?” And when I told them, they all had a good laugh. In fact, my friend’s mother graciously told me it was okay; she forgave me. But in the truest sense, there wasn’t really anything to forgive, was there? Something to overlook perhaps, or be gracious about, but not to forgive. On the other hand, if I had meant to insult her, if I had meant to call her carefully prepared meal “garbage,” that would not have been okay – and it would have required forgiveness. So let’s be clear: forgiving someone does not mean what they did was okay.

What it means is that we are not going to hold what someone did against them. We’re not going to define them by whatever they did. We are not going to get even. We’re not going to relate to them out of hatred, hurt, or disgust. No, instead of slamming the door shut and locking it against them, forgiveness means we’ll open the door, open the mind, open the eyes to another way of looking at the person: as a person. Not as a caricature or a monster or the villain in our mental melodrama. As a person not so different from ourselves. A person who has weaknesses and blind spots. A person who does not deserve forgiveness, but needs it even so. We may not become buddies right away, and we may have to limit how much we trust them, but forgiveness means we choose to look at them differently – as a person; imperfect, yes, but still a child of God and just as much in need of forgiveness as we are.

So how do we forgive like this? In the parable, Fouke needed magic eyes. In reality, we need eyes touched by God’s grace. And hearts. And minds. And wills touched by God’s grace, too. As in the parable, we need to ask for this grace. As in the parable, it may take time to genuinely forgive. But it can happen. Even in terribly painful circumstances. It can happen. And it does.

In his book, My America, Your America, Tom Buhlow shares an amazing example as tells how two mothers in one of Washington D.C.’s toughest ghettos formed a group called “*Mothers Forgiving Straight From The Heart.*” It began with a tragedy. Their sons, T. J. and J-Rock, were high school seniors. Both of them were pretty rough around the edges. Both of them were pretty angry young men. One day, J-Rock went out his way to humiliate T. J. in front of his girl friend. T. J. just couldn’t handle it. So, blinded by rage, he brought a gun to school the next day and shot down J-Rock in cold blood.

Buhlow reminds us that stories like this are not unusual in tough neighborhoods. But here’s what happened next. In court, after the judgment is declared, families usually depart through separate doors. Instead, J-Rock’s mother – whose boy had been murdered – went over to T. J.’s mother – whose boy was the murderer – and she gave her a great big hug. In a moment that could have been filled with hate, these two mothers came together. In fact, they promised to support each other, come what may, and they did, ultimately forming the group “*Mothers Forgiving Straight From The Heart.*”

But mind you, this didn't just happen. It happened because the two mothers chose to look at each other as a person and chose to look at each other's son as a person. On the one hand, J-Rock's grieving mother knew her own son all too well. She knew that under other circumstances, J-Rock could just as easily have been the one to shoot T. J. And on the other hand, T. J.'s mother knew what it was like to have a son shot down in cold blood. That had actually happened to her older son. What I'm saying is: these two mothers could look at each other and truly see a person very much like herself, a person who could easily be in the same spot as herself. And being Christians, what were they to do with that? Instead of hating, they reached out to each other. Instead of resenting, they supported each other. Instead of making things worse, they sought healing and brought hope to each other. Later, in fact, J-Rock's mother, Michelle, even went to visit T. J. in prison, went to visit the very boy who had murdered her son. And do you know what she told Tom Buhlow? "It wasn't hard. When you've made your peace with God, something like that is rather easy. It was a service to God."

Amazing, wouldn't you say? I don't know that I could ever call a visit like that "rather easy," but it shows that forgiveness can happen even in terribly painful circumstances. By God's grace, with God's help, it can happen. It does happen.

And it needs to. Forgiveness needs to be a normal part of our Christian life. Jesus didn't save us from sin just so we could go on living in it. And make no mistake, holding a grudge is a sin. It's an essentially selfish act, rooted in the old selfishness we're born with, the very selfishness we're trying to break out of. So grudges have no place in a Christian's heart. On the other hand, forgiveness is essentially unselfish. It reflects God's own self-giving love. And that is what we want to fill our hearts. More to the point, it's what Jesus wants to fill our hearts. So learning to forgive is a key part of spiritual growth.

And Jesus won't let us weasel out of it. His model prayer is clear: "**Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**" Last week we focused on the fourth petition, and part of the daily bread we ask for may well be the grace we need to forgive. Next week, we will focus on the sixth and seventh petitions, and one of the temptations we ask to be delivered from may be the temptation to think it's okay not to forgive. But between those two petitions is the one before us tonight that holds together our need of forgiveness and our need to forgive. Both are essential for a healthy Christian life. And think how this fits with the rest of the model Jesus has given us in the Lord's Prayer. As we accept and offer forgiveness, God's name is hallowed, God's rule becomes more real in our lives, and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. That is why Jesus has taught us, "**Pray then in this way...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**" Amen.

* *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, by Lewis B. Smedes, pages xvii-xix, Harper One, 1984.

