

First and foremost

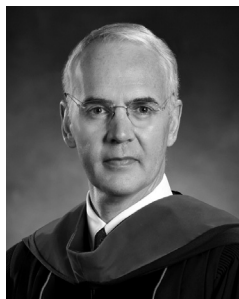
Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



SUNDAY WORSHIP

10:45 Ignite Modern Worship
8:30 & 11:00am Traditional Worship
Live Streaming: FirstPresGreenville.org



How About Now?

Matthew 5:43-44

Recently I was sent the following meme: My wife yelled from upstairs and asked, “Do you ever get a shooting pain across your body, like someone’s got a voodoo doll of you and they’re stabbing it?” I replied, “No.” She responded, “How about now?”

Over the last few Sundays at First Presbyterian Church, we have been working our way through one of the most compelling, challenging, and energizing passages in Matthew’s gospel, the Sermon on the Mount.

While exploring this remarkable section of Scripture, we have consistently sought to apply its teachings amidst the complicated, complex, exhausting challenges of an uncertain economy, concern over our children’s education, a global pandemic, and racial tension on a national scale. We have also dug a little deeper and asked a more personal question, “Who are we becoming as we respond to the challenges we face?” As we face each challenge and come out the other side, we ask again, “How about now?”

Love your enemies and pray for those...

This week we will participate in national and local elections in this divisive, confrontational political culture fed by aggressive and strident social media posts. In the midst of all that is taking place culturally and politically, it is worth asking, “Who are we becoming?” and “How does our faith inform our behavior?”

When Jesus challenges His listeners in the first century, and us in the 21st century, He does so in a profound and inescapable manner: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Mt. 5:43-44).

As you read these words, you may be thinking, *Richard, hold on a moment. This is exactly what I would expect a minister to say. But what you are suggesting is impossible. A few years back, I experienced a rather nasty divorce and the last thing I will be doing is turning the other cheek. Quite frankly, I want to tell everyone exactly what she did to me, who she really is, and what she is capable of. If you are asking me to apply this passage*

to my circumstances, you do not know what you are talking about! If you had experienced what I went through, you would not be casually suggesting that I turn the other cheek, love my enemy, or pray for those who persecute me.

So how do we turn the other cheek and pray for those who persecute us? Most of us will remember Wednesday, the 17th of June 2015, when a shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston killed nine people at the end of their midweek Bible study. As the perpetrator appeared in court a few days later, relatives who lost parents, grandparents, and family members demonstrated a stunning level of forgiveness:

I would just like you to know that, I say the same thing that was just said: I forgive you and my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters most: Christ. So that He can change you and change your ways, so no matter what happens to you, you’ll be okay.

—Relative of Myra Thompson

Individuals and families who have suffered at the hands of an abuser will tell you that the emotional and psychological wounds are deep. Lives are traumatized, and it takes a long time to adjust to what took place.

Let me suggest some other scenarios. What do you do when you are engaged to be married, it is called off, and you are left distraught? What do you do when a friendship fractures, turns sour, and nasty hurtful things are said? What do you do when you find your spouse has been involved in an affair and you feel betrayed, belittled, and traumatized?

You continue to relive past events in your mind. In your imagination you have lived out multiple times what you really wanted to do or say to the person involved. You feel angry, powerless, and uncertain about what to do. Yet forgiveness is possible.

Forgiveness

Offering forgiveness does not mean approving or excusing or justifying a person’s actions. Neither does it mean pretending to not be hurt. It is not repressing what took place. It is not refusing to deal with the event or pretending it doesn’t matter. Forgiveness is a conscious choice to release someone from a wrong done to you.

Forgiveness, whether reconciliation takes place or not, is the conscious decision by the offended party to release another person from the wrong that was done, whether or not they ever become friends again or do business again or hang out together.

Forgiveness can be either unilateral or transactional. Unilateral forgiveness is when you forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness. If you are waiting for someone to ask for forgiveness and they never say, “I’m sorry,” you may be emotionally held hostage to what took place.

In the book of Acts, when Stephen was being stoned to death, he asked God to forgive his perpetrators because they did not know what they were doing. That was unilateral forgiveness. Stephen was echoing the words of Jesus from the cross. Calvary was the greatest example in all of history of unilateral forgiveness.

Perhaps the person who abused you is now dead, and if you are waiting for them to express sorrow and apologize, you will be held hostage to what has occurred. Unilateral forgiveness is when you take the initiative, release another person from what they did, and then make a conscious effort to move on.

Transactional forgiveness is when a person recognizes the pain he has caused, confesses, requests forgiveness, and demonstrates repentance for the wrong he has done. As a result of his words and actions, the door to reconciliation is open.

Reading this you may be tempted to say, *Richard I agree with you. But what about the pain? It still hurts.* When you have been wounded and wounded deeply, you naturally want to take care of those wounds. Yet if you are not careful, you will identify only with the wound and be held hostage to your emotions. If you are ever to recover, you must focus on the healing and wholeness that is required in order to become healthy again.

It is entirely possible to break free from the anxiety and dependency we face. Healing and wholeness begin when we hand over to God the wounds of the past and rest in Him who brings His comforting presence and peace, binds up the brokenhearted, and grants strength and grace. He enables us to answer the question, “Who are we becoming as we respond to the challenges we face?”

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