

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, November 10, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. David McKane**

**Forgiveness**

Haggai 1:15b -2:9.

Psalm 98.

Matthew 18:21-35.

I am a child of WW2. I was born beneath the kitchen table in my grand-parents damaged home because my parent's home had been totally destroyed with all their belongings by a German bombing raid on Belfast. Belfast, after London and Coventry, was the most bombed city in Britain during WW2 and the loss of life was enormous.

Prayer. Forgiving God, as we gather to remember those who sacrificed much in 2 World wars may we never forget Christ's sacrifice and his command to love our enemies and forgive those who trespass against us. In Christ's name we pray.

There are those for whom this day brings memories of what we call World War 1 and World War 2 and there are those for whom this day is forever associated with memories of our Armed Forces and Cenotaphs, battles on land, at sea or in the air, P.O.W. camps and the voice of Vera Lynn. For others Remembrance Day brings the chilling memories of Kristallnacht, the ghettos and the annihilation of entire communities. For others it is the memory of the Merchant Navy and the North Atlantic convoys, of civilian work in munitions factories or as medical staff in behind the lines hospitals. For others it brings back the painful memories of being treated as the enemy in your own country because of your German or Japanese or Italian origin. For others with no memory of the first half of the last century such services seem an anachronism with very little relevance to their lives. Others have memories of other wars, of refugee camps, of being the victims of dictators and power grabs and ethnic cleansing and the loss of homes and families and searching for new homes and new countries where they can raise their children in peace. So there are a lot of emotions this morning, some of them conflicting and not all of them easy to deal with.

What we are about in this service is not the glorification of war, nor a religious version of what will happen tomorrow at Cenotaphs across this country and around the world.. What we are attempting to do in this service of remembrance is to remember that Nov.11 evokes many memories, some of which are particular to a generation and a nation but some which evoke memories that carry us beyond our nation and beyond the specifics of

World Wars 1 and 2 to deeper human issues and human questions. One such question is that of forgiveness.

Several years ago the American Feminist and Liberation theologian Isabel Carter Heyward led a seminary team participating in the insurrection against the brutal Somoza regime in Nicaragua. The team wrote a book called **Revolutionary Forgiveness: Feminist Reflections on Nicaragua**. One member wrote:

*"I learned in Nicaragua that forgiveness is a revolutionary virtue. It is revolutionary not because everyone is forgiven or because forgiveness is all in God's hands...Forgiveness is revolutionary because the former victims of an unjust system are able to see the systematic character of victimization and recognize thereby, their former oppressors also as victims. Those who forgive are prepared to blame the way society was structured rather than simply the way the individuals who participated in it. The individuals are held responsible primarily for the future, not the past. They are given a chance to change rather than being cast away."* It was that last line that caught me. They are given a chance to change rather than being cast away.

That is a profoundly Christian response. It is not a response shared by everyone. When the late Yitzhak Rabin and the late Yasser Arafat made their famous handshake on either side of then American President, Bill Clinton, in 1993, it was an act of revolutionary forgiveness having nothing to do with personal reconciliation and everything to do with the hope for mutual survival in the future. As Rabin said, "You don't make peace with friends but with enemies." Revolutionary forgiveness is a hard-nosed bet on the future, a bet that you could lose. It calls for the courage of hope. It makes space for hope to do its healing work.

How many times, asks Peter, and it is a very human question? We want to know the limits of our tolerance. We like to know what is expected of us. There is comfort in our knowing. Jesus replies seventy times seven. In other words, there is no limit to the number of times and no time limit on the need to forgive. It is not an answer that gives us much comfort. It is not the answer that Peter or we want to hear but it is the answer that Jesus gives. We all know something about forgiving individuals, persons who have wounded us or assaulted us or betrayed us. We know something of the pain of that, of the struggle of that, of the memory of that. We know also that while we have struggled hard to forgive we find it even harder to forget. If that is difficult on a personal level how do we forgive on a national level? How do we come to terms with the perpetrators of evil in political and economic systems that oppress, that we perceive to be a threat not only to us but to the security of our nation? This is the ongoing struggle for Palestinians and Israelis, for

Kurds and Syrians and Turks, for the Uyghurs of China, the Rohingya and the Karen's of Myanmar and countless other ethnic groups around our world.

And yet, and yet as Leonard Cohen reminds us: *"...the wars they will be fought again. The holy dove be caught again, bought and sold and bought again; the dove is never free. Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."* (Anthem.) That's how the light gets in.

I don't know how many of you saw the CBC news last Tuesday, a brief news item on Reiner Hess, grandson of Rudolf Hess, the Commandant of Auschwitz, a man who condemned millions to death. His grandson, brought to Canada by a Toronto Jewish group, came to tell his own story and the shame of his grandfather's actions under the Nazi regime and ask for forgiveness. It has only taken 74 years but that's how the light gets in.

When sheer grace opens up the eyes of our hearts to see our enemies as people, compassion leads the ways to forgiveness. American Reformed theologian of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote:

*"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.*

*No act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."*

Forgiveness that allows us to heal or accept the past.

Forgiveness that allows us to let it be and let go.

Forgiveness that opens a way for us to walk into the future.

Forgiveness that opens up a way for the Spirit of God to transform our hearts and renew our lives.

How many times? Oh, as many times as it takes until the wound is healed and the heart restored, and our enemies become our friends.

Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the children of God.( Matt.5) Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, ... for their deeds follow after them. (Rev.14)

Amen! And to God be the glory!