

Resources for Preaching Forgiveness in The Church

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This workshop intends to accomplish three things:

- Define forgiveness
- Think about those issues that make this so difficult for us in the holiness tradition
- Define a few resources for teaching, preaching, and living a life defined by forgiveness in the Church

A Few Assumptions

- The Church and for matter the Christian life is constituted by an act of forgiveness. Therefore, it makes sense to teach and live forgiveness as the Church.
- If we are going to be a people capable of forgiveness it will require the Church, since we are not naturally inclined to return good for evil. We could put it this way – It takes a Church for a person to be capable of forgiveness.
- If we are going to be a people of forgiveness it will require the hard work of truth telling. This sounds simple, but we know that learning to speak the truth to one another is difficult.
- If we are going to be a people of forgiveness we will need to be willing to both receive and extend grace.
- If we are going to be a people defined by forgiveness we must be willing to live with an optimism characterized by grace. This is a radical message that only a holiness church can teach. We dare to believe that the power of sin can be broken and we can in this life unlearn the bad habits of sin.

The Preamble of the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene reads, “The task of the Church of the Nazarene is to make known to all peoples the transforming grace of God through the forgiveness of sins and to make disciples.”

We would do well to heed the words of Richard Hays, professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, “The final task of New Testament ethics is the pragmatic task: embodying scripture’s imperatives in the life of the Christian community. Without this living embodiment of the Word, none of the above deliberation matters” [*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 7].

Defining Forgiveness

Scriptural Focus

Before we can fully address the meaning of forgiveness we need to consider very carefully how forgiveness is used in the scripture. One of the most important passages of scripture is found in Matthew 18:21-35.

From this passage we can conclude at least the following:

- There is something absurd about forgiveness - - forgiveness becomes possible at the very point of its impossibility.
- Forgiveness is integral to what it means to be the Kingdom of God.
- To forgive is to be moved (to have patience) by the debt/sin of another.
- Part of what it means to be forgiven is to be compelled to forgive.

We can find in the scripture at least four related, but slightly nuanced meanings of forgiveness. Comprehending these differences can help us to understand better the scriptural meaning attached to forgiveness.

To Cover

Psalm 78:38: “Yet he, being compassionate, **forgave** their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath.”

To Lift Away

1 Kings 8:30: “Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place, heed and **forgive**.”

1 Kings 8:34-36: “then hear in heaven, **forgive** the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors. When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish them, then hear in heaven, and **forgive** the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain on your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.”

2 Chronicles 7:14: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will **forgive** their sin and heal their land.”

Psalms 103:2-3: “Bless the Lord, O My soul, and do not forget his benefits – who **forgives** all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.

Matthew 6:12: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debts.”

Matthew 9:6: “But so that you may know that the Son of Man had authority on earth to **forgive** sins – he then said to the paralytic ‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home’.”

1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will **forgive** us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

To loose away

Luke 6:37: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. **Forgive**, and you will be **forgiven**.”

To be gracious

2 Corinthians: 2:5-11: *This passage reflects a time when Paul was personally wronged by a member of the church at Corinth. This context makes the passage all the more powerful.*

2 Corinthians 12:13: “How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? **Forgive** me this wrong!”

Ephesians 4:32: “and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving** one another as God in Christ as **forgiven** you.”

Colossians 2:13: “And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he **forgave** us all our trespasses.”

Colossians 3:13: “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, **forgive** each other; just as the Lord has **forgiven** you, so you also must **forgive**.”

A Preliminary Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the acceptance of the grace of God in our own life and an attitude of graciousness engendered by the triune life of God and the practices of the Church exhibited in the willingness to participate in the loosing (lifting away) of transgression and the debts incurred by others as well as a leaning toward reconciliation.

Some Fundamental Questions

Who is to forgive?

- The victim would seem to have the sole right to forgive a wrong committed
- This raises the issue of the contagious nature of evil and who can stop it (if it can be stopped).
- Since we never know the extent of the evil the capacity to forgive is called into question.
- The question of who is to forgive is related to how one is to forgive.

How does one face the past?

- Forgiveness assumes a memory.
- A related question - - How does God relate to time?
- Forgiveness to the extent that it happens always takes place in time.
- No one can change the past - - it is simply there.
- This calls us to consider how we will face the past.
- Time and memory belong together.

Is forgiveness forgetting?

- There is a curious relationship between forgetting and forgiving.
- The question is not so much whether we will remember, but how forgiveness renders memory.
- Forgiveness cannot be considered primarily as negation.

Does motivation matter?

- Forgiveness might be for personal peace of mind.
- Forgiveness might be for the moral high ground.
- The issue of motivation comes down to understanding the difference between purity and reciprocity.

Can forgiveness be final?

- Secularity wants to think of forgiveness in light of finality.
- Forgiveness is not final.

What does it mean to be forgiven? This is not a question isolated from the life we live.

First, where do I draw the line? I have a friend who tells me my big flaw is that I allow people to walk over me. He sees me as a doormat because of forgiveness that I have for others. How do I know where God would have me draw the line and how?

This is an extremely important question because it arises from a profound misunderstanding. Forgiveness is not about weakness or even allowing others to walk all over us. In fact, forgiveness requires a strength that can only come from God. It is because the person raising the question misunderstands forgiveness that there exists a confusion between emotional weakness and forgiveness. To put this matter clearly - - forgiveness is about beginning to see the world from an orientation that will allow us to confront without it being about us. Forgiveness does not accept sin; it confronts it graciously and redemptively.

The second question goes this way. My heart is disturbed when I hear someone on T.V. News saying something like - - I can't forgive him. He deserves what he will get. I hope he dies.

Here again we see a misunderstanding of forgiveness because there is not a one of us who can forgive unselfishly. The person who takes the point of view that "he deserves what he will get" or "I hope he dies" reflects a very different point of view from the gospel. Yet, these very attitudes creep into the church and when they do it is essential that they be confronted with the power of the gospel. If we understand forgiveness as graciousness, that is, as an attitude that will loosen the debt and lean toward reconciliation, then our attitude is defined not by the logic of revenge and desert, but hope.

The exciting thing for us to know is that we are not alone as we seek to practice forgiveness. God has left us with formal practices (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) as informal practices (prayer, scripture reading, formative preaching and teaching, and even discipline) to aid us in living the Christian life. Therefore, forgiveness is not just between you and another, but it is what you and I can accomplish as we are joined the "body of Christ". According to L. Gregory Jones, the dean of the faculty at Duke Divinity School, "the new life of holiness signified by baptism is found and lived in communities of God's Kingdom: People learn to embody forgiveness by becoming part of Christ's Body" [*Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, 4].

The Challenge of Talking about Forgiveness in the Holiness Tradition

Presumably, the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition informs the life and practice of those in the Church of the Nazarene. Any serious look at the theological trajectory of the Church of the Nazarene will reveal that our life together is characterized a tension between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. The **first** of these tends toward an intellectual positivism that can turn our life together into a set of issues. These issues will either call us together in purposeful association or divide us as we contend for our position. The **second** tends to unite us around a defined sense of experiences and determines our associations by our ability to comprehend these experiences

together. When we consider these parameters in relation to forgiveness the results are quiet revealing. Those among us who think of faith in fundamentalist terms tend to translate forgiveness into legalistic terms. It is often difficult to forgive because offence is turned into something that is owed to us or that we owe to another. When this happens forgiveness is a transaction resembling commerce. Those among us who tend toward the charismatic/Pentecostal direction tend to find it very difficult to either admit the offence or to see it as a process wrapped into the traditions of the church. Here forgiveness is not taken seriously because the offense is “submerged” under feelings that can for at least a time allow us to hide from the real work of forgiveness. These seem to be the outer limits of our life in the holiness tradition.

The challenge we face is to define a place from which we can talk about forgiveness in a realistic and theologically responsible way. In order to this we must learn how to talk about holiness and forgiveness in a different way.

Fundamental Concern

The basic question we face concerns why holy people find it so difficult to forgive. Nearly thirty years ago Dr Mildred Bangs Wynkoop attempted to define a problem at the heart of holiness theology. She called this problem the credibility gap. By this she meant that those who profess holiness often claim more than our actual experience bears out in life. In other words, we promise more than we ever see in order to secure the doctrine. Now nearly thirty years later we begin to see that the problem was bigger than she realized in the early seventies. The problem was internal to the doctrine, especially as we observed the forms of life that emerged from the preaching of the doctrine. The issue of forgiveness presents a clear example of this.

Scriptural Focus

1 Peter 1: 15-16

Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy”.

Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Matthew 22: 36-40

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Galatians 5: 22-26

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Ephesians 4:17-6:8

4:23 “renewed in the spirit of your minds”

4:24 “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”

4:25 “let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors”

4:29 “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up”

4:31-32 “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you”.

5:2 “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.”

5:3-6 But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you; as is proper among saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater); has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Theological Analysis of the Scriptural Focus

- Holiness is envisioned in the nature of God as described in the Bible.
- The character of the Christian life goes to the way we talk, act, and think.
- Love and respect for one another should characterize our associations with one another.

A Brief Primer in ‘Holiness Theology’

One thing should be clearly understood before any comments on Holiness theology are made. First, holiness theology is rich by the fact that it grows out of the theological conviction that God is holy. Second, holiness theology is shaped by our understanding of redemption and the triune life of God.

- God is holy and as such we are called to be holy.
- The pattern of the holy life is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- Holiness is capable of sustaining the central claims of the Christian faith.

- Holiness is gift and as such is always momentary.
- The genius of holiness theology is that the momentary gift of grace can be identified in the capacity a person has to “reflect salvation”.
- The beauty of holiness is that it can be “entire” and “perfect” as well as “progressive”.
- Holiness is the outward direction of the Christian life.
- Holiness does not change the fact that we are human, but it clearly transforms that humanity.
- Holiness is a social.

Excursus

Systematic theology as described above must take its cues from the texture of the life which arises from the gospel. A significant part of this “life” is the way that relationship, as a form of life, seems to be at the center of the meaning of the Christian faith. One way to talk about this relationship in terms of philosophical convictions is relational ontology. It is my philosophical conviction that the most adequate way to describe the world from the point of view of the Christian faith is interdependence, in other words, to be is to be related. The basic contours of the story which form this philosophical conviction begins with the story of a God, a “being-in-communion”, who calls a world into being, a world of complex relation. It also means that when the scripture story tells us that humankind is created in the image of God, it is a God who is in eternal communion. It is in this way that we are called to see ourselves, what we are, and what we can become by the grace of God. It also means that when the scripture says we are born into a complex fabric of co-determination called sin, it is a situation defined by our tendency to build our own prisons of alienation and estrangement. This is the wicked reality which confronts, distorts, and determines (soft determinism/affects) our every choice. Yet, the scripture also says that into this very situation, Jesus comes and offers us the hope by his life, death and resurrection, that the power of evil is not absolute. This Jesus comes to show us the way to live and sends the Paraclete to empower and envision a redeemed life. A community is called into existence by the Holy Spirit and the Word to engender our life together in the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. And it is as this community is shaped by the Word and the Sacrament in the power of the Spirit that it realizes and anticipates the Kingdom of God. All of this indicates a culture from which our language emerges. If we are going to reconstruct the doctrine of Christian perfection this is the basic vision of the faith by which it will be shaped.

What are those internal issues that have tended to Complicate Holiness theology?

Several issues have tended to lead to wide misunderstandings and misinterpretations of holiness theology. Each of these have in one way or another managed to claim for a while the imagination of a sufficient number of people to lead some to conclude that it represented “Holiness Orthodoxy”.

- Perfectionism is the conception that holiness is about a flawless performance of holy living. Here the meaning of perfect is determined by Greek ideas of eternity and pure actuality. A perfect person is one that is never tempted and most of all never sins. This is part of what Dr Wynkoop was attempting to combat in her proposal concerning the “Credibility Gap”.
- Legalism grows out of perfection, but here holiness is reduced to a set of external standards. This perversion of holiness was and is characterized by strict dress codes, especially for women. This form of holiness theology tends to reduce the need for grace because holiness is finally the result of the sheer force of the will to conform to a set of tried and true standards. This view is sometimes called “rings and things” Christianity.
- Emotionalism may combine some forms of both of first two tendencies, but holiness is not finally about being perfect or flawless nor it is about conforming to a set of standards. Holiness from this perspective becomes an experience of such intensity that one’s standing with God cannot be realistically doubted. The hallmark of this tendency is spirited worship. It is often understood that what distinguishes holiness folk can be readily observed in the fervor and intensity of worship. This way of looking at holiness is most afraid of worship becoming so formal that the “Spirit” is bound in the community. The most important issue here is the “feeling” that holiness fosters in the life of holiness people. The joy of the Spirit is so powerful that it raises the quality of one’s life to victory and surpassing peace.
- Reduction to Morality is a more mature form of the legalistic tendency. As holiness theology matured and more fully embraced the broader domains of theological reflection legalism was rightfully dismissed. Those who were desperately attempting to bring holiness theology to the same table with mainline Protestantism and at least more open-minded Catholics seized on the opportunity link morality with holiness. After all one of the criticisms of Christians by holiness people had been the gross inconsistency of those who “professed” to be Christian without “behaving” like Christians. In fact, William Greathouse said in *Exploring the Christian Faith* that salvation viewed morally was sanctification. This has proven to be a very attractive way of thinking about holiness for many, especially in the Classically Wesleyan camp.
- Interiorization is a more mature version of the emotionalism discussed above. This understanding is a fundamental reaction to the charge that holiness theology amounts to legalism. It is the effort to secure holiness theology in the face of the charge that we have tended to retrench from all or most claims about behavior and instead talk about holiness in terms of a “pure heart” or “pure intention”. A well-known and much celebrated definition of this version of holiness is “purity of heart is to will one thing”.

What does forgiveness look like in a Holy Life?

- Responsible grace is the recognition that the life of holiness is an expression of the grace of God. It means that the grace of God engenders a quality of life that begins to reflect the Triune life of God, that is, harmony, love, patience, and mutuality. L. Gregory Jones says, “Unfortunately, the converse would seem to be equally true. Could it be that one of

the reasons Christians see so little authentic forgiveness in the world is that, because our own lives are too marked by either cheap grace or bitterness and violence (or both), we have had our vision eclipsed by our own failures”. *Embodying Forgiveness*, 222. Forgiveness is a recognition of our forgiveness.

- Health is the understanding that holiness is about what renders our life more whole or more complete. We have resisted using the term entire, but perhaps we should pick that word up, dust it off, and begin using it again. A healthy person is an attractive person because we instinctively know what health is. A healthy person is probably a balanced person, that is, a person who lives with the sort of practical wisdom that allows the real issues to be engaged. L. Gregory Jones says, “By contrast, the Christian account I have been developing insists that our own moral histories are precisely what are at issue, because of forgiveness is focused on the reconciliation and healing of our broken pasts, not simply the absolution of guilt”. *Embodying Forgiveness*, 213. Forgiveness is an expression of a spiritually healthy person.
- Unity of the inner and the outer is a fundamental expression of Christian holiness. It links the *Sermon on the Mount* with all those expression that indicate that God looks on the heart of a person. Holiness is the uniting of the inner inclination and the outer manifestation. L. Gregory Jones says, “most of the discussions continue to focus primarily on the act of forgiveness, while giving only minimal attention to notions of forgiveness as a specific practice or trait of character – much less as an embodied way of life”. *Embodying Forgiveness*, 218. Holiness is dependent upon “pure” intentions, but it will not rest there because holiness is about a particular kind of character. Forgiveness is an outward expression of an inner desire to extend the grace that has come to rest on us.
- Social holiness is the understanding that God intends us to live our life together as a body and a temple. Wesley was prone to say that holiness is linked to social expression, both as works of mercy and as accountability to one another. When holiness is properly understood it resists the kind of possessive individualism that often characterizes modern Western society. Social holiness rests on the understanding that we cannot help but live our life in the presence of the other. We are after all created in the image of God as creatures called to live in communion with God and others. Forgiveness is the capacity to see the grace of God in the life of another and to see part of our life in the other as well.
- Honesty becomes a real possibility in the life of holiness because it pulls together the idea of a holy God with our mutual accountability with others. The one sure thing that holiness requires is the kind of honesty that opens our life up. L. Gregory Jones talks about two important movements here: diachronic (learning from the traditions that have come before us) and synchronic (being attentive to those in our midst who have the capacity to be holy and forgive). It is this very honesty that opens our life to God and to others and finally opens our life even to ourselves. Forgiveness is envisioned in the honesty that becomes possible through a life that is open to God.

- Worship means to shape all of life around the reality of God. It is to understand that life is a gift and that every action of my life when it is properly directed is toward the worship of God. It is to understand that God so created humanity that we are predestined (intended) to live toward the reality of God's grace. This means that a holy life is a doxological life and a beautiful life. Forgiveness is possible to the extent that our life is shaped by the appropriate worship of God.

Resources for Preaching About Forgiveness in the Church

Forgiveness is more than a theory, it an actual practice. It is a process of living life creatively and redemptively in conscious awareness and appreciation of the grace of God. The practice of forgiveness is to live a cruciform life. This raises two very important issues. First, forgiveness must be understood as a specific process. In other words, we must be very careful that we do not dilute the meaning of forgiveness by so broadening its meaning that it no longer means anything. Second, we must locate other practices in the Christian faith, which address evil, disappointment, frustration, and so on by which it will be possible to live a whole and healthy life. In other words, while forgiveness is an important, even essential practice it is not the only practice by which the Christian can face life.

Scriptural Focus

The first story is the well-known narrative of Joseph and his brothers told in Genesis 37-50. It begins with the obvious jealousy that exists between Joseph and his brothers. It is unmistakably a problem that Jacob has caused by his favoritism to Joseph. The story also makes it clear that Joseph enjoys his status and does not hesitate to remind his brothers of his status. All of this results in his brothers attempting to solve the situation by trapping their brother and sending him off into slavery. This leads to several events in the life of Joseph including resisting the temptation to have sex with the wife of Potiphar, which lands him in jail. This results in the interpretation of the dreams of two prisoners. Finally, Joseph interprets of the dream of the Pharaoh. Because Joseph interprets the dream correctly and thereby saves Egypt from a famine he is placed in an important position. All of this sets up the dramatic confrontation between Joseph and his brothers. This happens when they come to Egypt in order to buy food. The climatic moment is found in Genesis 45: 1-7. This could have been a moment when the brothers were made to suffer the consequences of their actions, but instead it was a moment when they were forgiven. It seems clear from the passage that this was possible because Joseph was able to see the event against the horizon of God's intentions instead of a past wrong that needed to be addressed. Clearly, the past was there and it could not be changed. After all Joseph had been taken by Midianite traders, tempted by Potiphar's wife, and imprisoned and from one perspective all of this was due to the actions of his brothers. But Joseph is capable of seeing it in another way. Joseph sees it as the path of salvation for his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (45:7). This is one way to practice forgiveness.

The second story comes from the New Testament and it is also well known. It is the story of the dispute between Paul and Barnabas regarding Mark. The conflict is told in Acts 15: 36-41. Here we see a sharp disagreement between two first missionaries over whether it Mark should be

allowed to accompany them. Paul did not want to take a person who had deserted them in Pamphylia and Barnabas wanted to take him because he understood and perhaps allowed that Mark had grown up a bit. The result of this is that Paul leaves with Silas and Barnabas leaves with Mark. And the work of God proceeds in spite of the disagreement. One might wonder how long this controversy continued. We get a sense of that in Colossians 4: 10 “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you welcome him”. It is clear that the conflict was not allowed to become a barrier to the work of God. This was possible because Paul was capable of admitting that he was wrong about Mark in the end. It was also possible because the conflict was not allowed to impede the early church’s vision of ministry.

The Practice of Forgiveness

“For Christians, forgiveness is not simply an action, an emotional judgment, or a declarative utterance- though Christian forgiveness includes all those dimensions. Rather, forgiveness is a habit that must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community. This is so because, as I have been suggesting, in the face of sin and evil God’s love moves toward reconciliation by means of forgiveness. Forgiveness aims to restore communion on the part of humans with God, with one another, and with the whole Creation. This forgiveness is costly, since it involves acknowledging and experiencing the painful truth of human sin and evil at its worst. In the midst of such brokenness, God’s forgiveness aims at healing people’s lives and re-creating communion in God’s eschatological Kingdom”. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, 163.

A practice is:

- Coherent
- Complex
- Socially established
- Cooperative
- Human activity
- Goods are realized
- Capacity to achieve that life are extended

The practice of forgiveness will require:

- A clear sense of the nature of God - - affected, forgiving, gracious, and free
- An understanding of one’s forgiveness, that is, being receiving the gift

- Engendering a Christian imagination, that is, unlearning the bad habits of sin that too often dictate the manner in which we treat one another.
- Envision a social understanding of the self, that is, determine to practice a social holiness capable of accountability, reciprocity, mutuality, and Triune fellowship.
- A commitment to a process or way of life that consciously shapes life through the unfolding gift of God, that is to live graciously.

“As I will argue in this chapter, the practice of forgiveness is closely related to, and partially learned in the context of, other practices. That is, forgiveness both describes a practice of Christian life (bound up with such notions as confessions, repentance, and reconciliation) and involves the sustenance of a set of practices (which have purposes that include, but are not limited to forgiveness). Jones, 165

Practices that are Constitutive of Wholeness and Forgiveness

“A culture which tolerates the loss of a sense of damage to the moral identity, the loss of shame or remorse, is bound to be one that dangerously overplays the role of the will in the constructions of human persons”. (Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, 102)

Baptism is a sacrament of the Church. It defines us as forgiven and brought into the community. It is a dramatic statement of my identity. According to Jones, “baptism signifies the transformation of individual selves through their initiation into the friendships and practices of eschatological Christian community, the horizons of which are ever-expanding” (167). Baptism is a call to holiness, a gift of communion, a reception of a new identity, a recognition of our need for one another, and it stresses the priority of forgiveness in our lives.

Communion is remembering the past in hope of the future. According to Jones, “The Eucharist is an eschatological meal that recalls the past, anticipates the future, and sustains us in the present” (175). He also says, “Christ’s sacrifice relocates our lives as forgiven betrayers, as reconciled sinners, in communities of broken yet restored communion” (176). The Eucharist is a call to learn how to live in communion with God and with others. It is also a call to remember the past truthfully with no need to revise it for therapeutic purposes. It is a practice of expectation that includes both salvation and judgment. It is a meal we take together in the provision of God’s grace.

Reconciling Forgiveness is difficult but ultimately fruitful practice of a tender heart and a discerning mind. It takes place in light of the persistence of post-baptismal sin, which threatens communion with one another and with God. It requires that we understand our need for one another and our accountability to one another. This will require a level of patience that we often find difficult because it requires a process instead of a single event in order to comprehend reconciling forgiveness. Such a practice will force us to consider the way in which power can impede our life in Christ and with each other. Power can make the kind of trust that is necessary for forgiveness less likely. Finally, reconciling forgiveness requires us to understand that those who are unwilling to participate in this kind of practice may exclude themselves from the communal life of those seeking to live out the implications of a reconciling forgiveness. But we

must also understand that this exclusion is only temporary because the hope of all discipline in the community is designed to bring about reconciliation. [Proverbs 14:15 “The simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps”; Proverbs 19:21 “The human mind may devise many places, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established”].

Prayer is the practice of the presence of a caring and free God. It is the way that most of us do theology. If you want to know what a person truly believes to be the case about God, sin, grace, forgiveness and so on listen to them pray. Prayer is the acknowledgement that we need God in the situation and it expresses an action that we believe that God is capable of answering, even more than that we believe that God wants to answer. [Psalm 26:1 “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering”; Psalm 31:2 “Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me”; Psalms 38:1 “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath”].

Lament is the faithful expression of our pain in the presence of God and the Christian community. It signals our despair and as such it comes close to hopelessness. It comes on those dark days and long nights when we see no answer and all we feel is the pain. Lament is not, however, hopeless when practiced by a Christian because as we express our pain we are fully aware that it is in the presence of one who cares and in a community that cares. Lament finally gives way to praise, as it is shaped by our understanding of God. [Psalm 18:6 “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried out for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears”; Psalm 22: 2 “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest”; Psalm 38:6 “I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning”; Lamentations 1:16 “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage; my children are desolate for the enemy has prevailed”].

Christian Counseling is a practice of informed (wise) advice and care that is rendered to those who are so deeply injured that an extended time of reflection and conversation is necessary. It is important to understand that Christian counseling is never understood as something that exists outside of the theological and practiced traditions of the Christian faith. It is also important to understand that the call for legitimate confidentiality can never be a means of hiding from the truth or pretending that counseling can ever be a “private” matter. Christian counseling is a Christian practice to the extent that it is shaped by a commitment to the truth and Christian community. [1 Corinthians 13:4-7 “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things”].

Complaint is a faithful expression of our anger at God and others. It is shaped by a willingness to express that anger in the context of our “even-deeper-faith”. This can be expressed to God or it can be expressed to another, but the real issue is our faith that God and the community care. [Psalm 10:1 “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble”; 10:15, “Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until your fine none”; Psalm 13:1 “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”; Psalm 74:1 “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger

smoke against the sheep of your pasture?"; Psalm 94:3 "O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult"; Lamentations 2:7 "The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces; a clamor was raised in the house of the Lord on a day of festival"; Nahum 3:5-7 "I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let the nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle"].

Discipline is the expression of our care for those who are part of the Christian community. It is dependent upon a "pastoral" relationship with the other. In other words, it is the expression of our love for the person, not just as an "idea" but also as a "tangible" thing. The basic rule is that discipline is only possible in light of the hard work of relationship. Most of all discipline cannot be about what I need to happen or to say in order to be satisfied. Rather it is about what will be the most appropriate in order to bring about a more "healthy" life for the one we love and care about. [Proverbs 12:1 "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but those who hate to be rebuked are stupid"; Proverbs 28:23 "Whoever rebukes a person will afterward find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue"].

Excommunication is the most radical practices of the Christian faith. It must always be accomplished with tears in our eyes and always as a last a final event in a long process. One is never excommunicated in order that we are to be done with them. Rather, a person is excommunicated as a prelude to receiving him/her back into fellowship.

Stanley Hauerwas writes a very insightful essay in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*. The essay in the book to which we will now look is "Why time cannot and should not heal the wounds of history, but time has been and can be redeemed". He quotes a Yale University Divinity School theologian by the name of Miroslav Volf in this essay. This quote is important for our consideration.

What will happen after God has narrated the history of the offender's sin in the context of grace and has given the offender a new identity"? The answer is so simple and we are so used to hearing it that we miss its profundity: God, to whom all things are present, will *forget* the forgiven sin. The God of Israel, who is about "to do a new thing" and who calls people "not to remember the former things," promises to blot their transgressions out of God's own memory (Isaiah 43:18-19, 25; cf. 65:17). "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). (Hauerwas, 149)

The good work of ministry can be difficult, but the hope we all have is that in the preaching a living of this message our church can be a place for reconciling forgiveness.