



"Forgiveness"

(TOGETHER Sermon Series) by Timmy Fearer
Sunday, April 21, 2024

Before we get into the message, on behalf of your pastors and elected elders of this church, I want to bring you another one of our regular progress reports. As you know, your Session – for those of you who are new, the Session is the Board of Elders and the pastors – has been revisiting our statements of mission, that is, declaring what we're about here at First Prez Honolulu. A mission is what we do, and for recent years, it's "Love God, love people, and reach the world for Jesus Christ." That's the business that we're in, you could say. And then our values, we've been looking at those as well. Your values color everything that you do as you're being true to your mission. And PATHS has been the acronym to capture what we've held as values in recent years: Presence, Authenticity, Thoughtfulness, Humility, Service. I hope you see that in everything that we do, even in this worship service today.

Your leaders have been steadily reviewing and reworking and refreshing these for this current world that we live in now. Things have changed. It's different than it was five years ago, isn't it? And the season we've entered in as a church, this is all getting us ready to move into the next chapter of our story as First Prez.

We anticipate being able to share this part of the work – our mission and our values – with all of you in June. We'll focus on those things in the month of June. That's not that far away.

In the meantime, your elected leaders have begun the work of discerning a vision for First Prez. What we mean by that is a direction, a big, bold dream that we want to pursue together as a congregation. Without that, number one, you don't really know where you're going. And number two, without that, we don't really know what kind of a permanent senior pastor to look for. For those of you who are new, I'm a transitional pastor here for an interim period. We're going to be searching for the next long-term pastor sometime later this year. For example, if X, Y and Z are your big dream, what specific qualities in the next pastor does that big dream call for? What does it require to find somebody who can walk with you, journey with you as you head towards that big dream.

So, it's important to do this work together. And your elders and pastors currently on the staff here, they want to know what your big dream is for this church. As they listen and discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to them, they'd like to know what the Holy Spirit is saying to you.

We want you to pray about that and pay attention to what comes into your heads and your hearts. Then put it in writing in a single sentence. What's your one, big, bold dream for this church for the year 2030? That's just five and a half years away. How do you do this? Well, most of you get a weekly email. It's already in your inbox. In the weekly email, the lead article is giving you very simple instructions and also a link that you can click. Fill that in whenever you're ready. It will be

available to you over the next weeks through May 11. You've got some time. Or you can go "old school" and go to the welcome table. There's some forms you can take home, pray about it, write it in, drop it back at the Welcome Table or in the giving box in the coming weeks.

With that, let me pray for us as we transition.

Father, we come to you through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let the good news come not only in word but in power in the Holy Spirit this morning. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the crucified and risen One. Amen.

We are in week three of our spring series. We're calling it *Together* and we have a little sub-series these last three weeks. Let me just repeat the passage we've been in. Jesus says this in his sermon on the mount.

Matthew 5:21-22

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' [That's commandment number six of the 10 Commandments.]; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment [This is all out of the book of Exodus, ancient wisdom for Israel.]. But I say to you [That's Jesus' now with his commentary.] that if you are angry with a brother or a sister [that is, somebody in the church family], you will be liable to judgment. [In other words, anger is that serious. Carried, nurtured, unresolved anger – that's what he's talking about. That's what we've been talking about the last few weeks.]; and if you insult a brother or a sister [Remember, we've said anger has the tendency to slip out of the mouth.], you will be liable to the council. [He's talking about the ancient Jewish Supreme Court. Remember, Jesus is exaggerating to get our attention, to tell us

how serious he is about this.]; and if you say, "You fool" [which in the ancient world in the New Testament was to make a condemning, damning kind of a statement or a judgment on somebody. There are a lot of things that can come out of your mouth. Some of them are worse than others.], you will be liable to the hell of fire. [You're playing with fire, if that's how you roll, if that's what you traffic in, is just condemning people.

Anger is serious. Jesus is serious about it. Now, Jesus doesn't envision some sort of a system of Sharia law and law courts and punishments. Again, he's exaggerating, but he's communicating with this exaggerating that we're going to need to answer for out of control, unmanaged anger, undealt with anger.

So he continues. This was last week.

Matthew 5:23-24

So when you are offering your gift at the altar [Now he's taking us into the ancient Jewish Temple worship service 2,000 years ago. It's almost like in our service, you've heard the sermon, you're about to come forward to take the Lord's Supper. If that's where you find yourself Jesus says:], if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you [somebody's angry with you], leave your gift there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Jesus is saying, before you focus on how others may have let you down, not lived up to your expectations – remember, anger always comes out of unmet expectations – go out and see how you may have let other people down, not lived up to their expectations, thus their anger, and make it

right. Do it before you come in here and go through all the motions of God-love – you've got your hands raised and your eyes closed, reveling in this love of God – but you've been neglecting neighbor-love, pretending before God that everything's fine with your neighbor when it's not. Jesus says straighten that stuff out before you come in here. Then he concludes with this:

Matthew 5:25-26

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're on your way to court with him [Again, he's creating this artificial exaggerated scene to get the point across, basically saying, in your stubbornness, you've waited this long. It's the last opportunity. You're actually physically on your way to court with the person who's bringing a charge against you. It's almost too late. Too late means further damage, irreparable damage is possible. You've waited this long.], *or your accuser may hand you over to the judge* [here's the too late part], *and the judge to the guard and you will be thrown in prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Jesus is saying, “Don't be stupid. Don't let things go so far that it becomes too late and it's going to cost you more. Anger, reconciliation, facing what we need to face, taking initiative, making things right, as much as that is in your power – and we do have a lot of power to make things right – make it right. That was last week and the week before.

Let me just clarify something again here. You might get the impression that anger is bad or don't be angry, don't feel anger. Be careful whenever anybody says don't feel [fill in the blank]. Feelings – that's just where you are. That's the reality of where you are and anger, in and of itself, is a

neutral thing. Paul says in the New Testament be angry, but don't sin in it. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. It's not anger. It's what you do with your anger, what you don't do with your anger. That's what gets you in trouble. But how you feel, that's your reality. God meets us in the reality of where we are. Our emotions are telling us where we are and that's where God wants to meet you and me. So, are you carrying anger or is somebody carrying anger against you? Let God meet you in that place.

I gave you homework last week. I hope you're doing your homework. We're not checking. This is what Jesus wants from us and, really, for us because He loves us: seeking, offering, finding forgiveness. That's where this is all going. And that's what today's message is about.

500 years ago, the pastor in Geneva, John Calvin, said that the primary church is the home. It's the family unit, the household that you're in. He said that's the place where the most profound shaping of lives happens. You're disciplined there, or you are discipling other people who are impressionable kids in your household, under your roof. It's the location of the greatest potential blessing, and it's also the location of the greatest potential harm.

Two weeks ago, when we first got into this passage and this topic of anger, I told you a little bit about my anger that I had carried towards my father for decades and how, by the power of the Holy Spirit, I was reconciled to Him. As with all reconciliation, that's a story of forgiveness. And I want to tell you that story now. And I want you to pray for me. This is not easy for me to tell you, but it's good for you to hear it, and so that's why I tell it.

I mentioned that my father's words, his actions, his inactions really hurt me as a kid. I know a number of us, maybe most of us, have experiences with whatever parents we knew, we had. Some of those experiences were tough, were negative, were wounding. I think, like all of us, our parents were a mixed bag of groceries.

My dad was a great guy. He was a very successful businessman. He was funny. He was loyal. He was not a gossip, not a complainer, a hard worker. And he loved me and he loved my older brother. But at some point, the effect on me of the negative stuff, I just chose to shut down emotionally in relation to him. I held things against him, nurtured my anger, carried it with me, and I condemned him. It was a big wound and I was making it worse.

That went on for a number of years. That was firmly fixed in my young adult heart and mind at the age of 32, many years ago, when my dad was suddenly diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. That's a painful way to go. I think people are lasting longer these days, but then it was a pretty short sentence. He lasted seven months.

At the time, I was on the staff of our home church, and I was in a doctoral program. I was getting a PhD. I was hiding in a PhD program, running away from the call of God on my life. Actually, a lot of people hide in graduate school. I was hiding there and I was getting ready for these big exams before you write your dissertation, before you write your book. These four written exams took six months to get ready for, then there would be a week break, and then there would be an oral exam with your professors sitting around the table grilling you for two hours on what you said in your written exam.

So, I was getting ready for this. Dad went into the hospital six weeks before the exams. The writtens were on a Wednesday, the oral was on the following Wednesday, and dad died on Saturday.

I was there when he died, by the grace of God. I really hadn't seen him too much. If you could do things over again. I never prayed for his healing, not because I wanted to him to die, just because I was shut down, kind of numb. But I was there. My brother and his wife arrived 45 minutes after dad passed. They were driving from Santa Barbara down to Orange County, Southern California.

When he died, I had this oral examination the following Wednesday, and I just knew in my heart I was supposed to take that exam as scheduled. Now, any fool would have postponed it. In fact, I called my professor. You remember him. I've talked about him in recent months. He was an immigrant to the United States. He was in the Hitler Youth as a child, like every German kid was the 1930s, early 40s. He was a great Christian. I called him and he said, "You can go all the way up to the last second before this exam and back out." I thanked him.

We made arrangements on Saturday and Sunday. We had the service on Monday. It was a quick turnaround. And then we had the graveside service on Tuesday. Then I drove back to my place, my crummy little graduate student apartment in Claremont. The Claremont Colleges was where I was doing my work.

That Tuesday night, I just panicked. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, what am I doing?" I called a friend who had been through the exams. He really ministered to me. Then the next morning, I was studying,

getting ready for the two o'clock moment of reckoning with my professors. At 10am, the phone rings and it's my professor. He's calling and saying, "Okay, are you gonna go through with this?" And I said, "Yeah." And then, in his thick German accent, he said, "Vell, you better vatch out." And he said, "You have real problems on this one particular exam. You better be ready." I thanked him. He wasn't supposed to be telling me this. He was looking out for me.

I hung up the phone, one of those old black rotary phones, looking down at my cheap linoleum floor in this apartment. I was by myself. I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but I was paralyzed. I was out of gas. I was at the end of my rope. I didn't have anything left in me, with everything that had been going on, and I was just staring at the floor. And I said out loud, "You fool! You're going to fail this thing and you will never have it in you to go through all this preparation again. You're done."

At that moment, I felt something alight on the top of my head and pass through my body. It went from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. It was like a wave that was breaking inside of me, physically moving through me. There was a very clear line of demarcation above the line and below the line. Below the line was despair and defeat and paralysis. And above the line was power and victory and confidence. It went right through me and it scared me. As I was looking at the floor, I then said something deeply spiritual: "What the hell is happening to me?" And then I said, "Oh, it's God. You're gonna be okay. Go back to your room and finish studying."

So, I went back to my room and I focused on that problem area for the next four hours. I walked into

the conference room where the exam was going to happen at 2pm. My professors were there with their long faces. They they knew my dad had died. I said, "Hey, don't favor me because of what I've been through." They said, "Well, we won't." And I thought, "I wish you...."

So, I sat down and they went right after me with the problem exam. For the first 10 minutes, it was kind of touch-and-go. But I gave the bare minimum, and then for the next two hours, I had a great time with them, answering every question. They dismissed me from the room. They called me back in. "Congratulations! You've passed. You've done so well, you've raised your marks on how you did on the written space, on how you did on the oral." Glory to God!

So, I walked home and I was just kind of in shell shock. I didn't say to myself, "Gosh, I had a charismatic experience with the Holy Spirit in my kitchen this morning. I'll never be the same." But that's exactly what had happened to me. I didn't tell anybody about what had happened to me for five months. I just sat with it.

Towards the end of that period, I really heard God say to me, "You know, Tim, not only was I saving you that morning and that afternoon five months ago, giving you what you needed to do what you had to do, but I'm also here." It was like God put his hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm here, Tim. And I have a lot of power, and there's a lot that I want to do in you and through you, but you are not letting me. Let me in."

So, I started letting him into some of the deeper places of my life. First order of business: make

peace with dad. It was holding me back in all of my adult relationships, keeping me from growing up.

A couple of months later, I was taking steps to let God in by taking a class on inner healing prayer at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena. The first night teaching concluded with an invitation: bring something you want healing for next week and we'll deal with it in class. So I thought, "Okay, here it is. Get right with Dad."

Let me give you more of a window into what was happening in me. When I was in sixth grade, I was playing Little League Baseball. I'm tall, so they put me on first base because I could stretch to make the catch. Also, I was a pitcher. So, for the first three innings: first base; second half: on the pitcher's mound. My dad never came to any of my games, in anything, growing up, except once when I was playing first base, and then on the pitcher's mound. He came to one game, and I think it was because my mother, who was the great athlete in the family, was badgering him. "You have to go." She told me, "Your dad is going to come to your game today." I thought, "Oh, great."

During the first three innings, he's nowhere to be seen. I'm on the pitcher's mound during inning four. I look over my shoulder. Out beyond the right field chain link fence, there's a service road, and I see his car pull up. I thought, "Great!" I pitch a few, and turn back. He's not getting out of the car. He's just staying in the car. He never got out of the car. Game over. Go home. Nothing was ever said.

Ten years later, I'm visiting my favorite aunt, his sister, in western Pennsylvania. We're having a great week together, and she's telling me stories of the family. She tells me this story of coming home

from college – they were both in college together – for the summer break. There's a pickup baseball game in the open field out behind the house. All the kids have come home and those who had stayed home all got together, choosing up sides. One side was just killing the other side. Working their way through the batting order – runs in, runs in – all the way through the batting order. Strikeout. Through the batting order again. Strike out number two. Through the batting order against. Strikeout number three. And it was the same guy who struck out every time. Who do you think that was?

Ten years. I didn't connect the dots. It took 10 more years after that. As my life was opening up, by the grace of God, and the Holy Spirit was working in me, the Holy Spirit put the two stories together. He never got out of the car. He didn't come to the games. Was it because he was a busy business executive? No. He didn't come because the baseball field was a very uncomfortable place for him. That's not an excuse, but it did help me see my dad for the broken kid he was inside his adult body. I began to see my father with compassion.

So, back to the class. On night number two, prayer teams are organized. Everybody says just go to a prayer station. I get paired up with Brian, who's an unemployed Episcopal priest, but this guy knew how to pray. He listened to my story. He sat me down. We set up three chairs – one for him, one for me, and then an empty chair. He started praying and then he said, "Plant your feet on the ground. I want you to pretend there are holes in the bottom of your feet. Are you ready to let go of your anger towards your dad?" I said, "I am ready." You have to be ready, right? He said, "I want you to just let it drain out of your head, out of your heart, out of your chest, down through your trunk, down

through your legs, just let it go right down into your feet, through those holes into the floor, and away from you forever.” I said, “Okay.” He prayed for me. I could feel it leaving me, just right through, down to my feet, down into the bowels of hell, where it belongs.

We sat there and then he said, “Your father is sitting right here in this empty chair. What do you want to say to him?” Here is what came out of my mouth: “I’m sorry.” Without the anger, I was no longer the accuser; I was the confessor.

You know those three questions we’ve been battling around the last several months:

1. What happened?
2. How did it hurt me?

It’s important to ask and answer those questions. I would just live in there, just embracing that, and our culture is right there – I’m a victim. A lot of us are victims of all kinds of things. But the third question:

3. And what was your sinful response to what happened to you?

I had not asked that question. I was now answering it and saying, “I condemned you, Dad, and that was wrong. I need you to forgive me. I’m sorry.” I said, “I needed you, Dad.” I went down the list and I said, “I forgive you.” Church, I have never felt one ounce of anger against my father since that night 35 years ago.

Now, that’s a story of restoration and transformation. That kind of inner healing, like all inner healing, is the forgiveness of sins. That’s what it’s about. That’s what The Lord’s Table is about. God was calling me to be reconciled to my dad. The Holy Spirit was giving me the power to do it. I took steps to cooperate. I sought help. I engaged in

prayer. I agreed to let go of my anger. I confessed my own contribution, my own sin. I forgave.

Let me tell you something. You can be reconciled to somebody and they may have been dead for 50 years. It doesn’t matter. It can happen.

Whom do you need to forgive in your life? Against whom is your anger directed? Let’s just sit with that for a second.

As that name or that face comes to you, let us help you do that – forgive. That’s what your pastors, your elders, your staff, your brothers and sisters, that’s what we’re here for – forgiveness. If we’re not here for that, what is this? Some club.

So I’ve given you Spiritual Steps for the Week.

1. Identify whom you need to forgive, who you’re carrying anger against.
2. Ask God to:
 - set you free from your anger;
 - help you release that person from your anger;
 - help you forgive that person.

It’s a process isn’t it?

3. And then, as you’re ready, forgive that person:
 - in your heart;
 - verbally, in conversation with them, if that’s possible.

That may not be possible. For some people who have hurt you, they’re not safe to be around, so you don’t want to get right in next to them, give them another opportunity, but you can still release them.

Anger, reconciliation, forgiveness. If you have taken steps over the last several weeks, even a single step, even just a little baby step, or maybe your first

step is right now, deciding “Yes, God, I'm going to let you in and help me forgive that person.” If that's happened, you're ready to come to the Table. We've been preparing.

Let's prepare our hearts. Let me pray for us.

Father, you're so good. Whether we knew our earthly father or not, we have you as a father who's perfect and you provide everything that we need. You provided this moment to experience a touch from you. I pray that would be the case for everyone. Help us to let go of anger, to forgive, to take steps in that direction, and be strengthened individually, as a family unit, as a church, as we walk into the future that you have for us. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.