

Forgive, and Forgive Again

“How often should I forgive?” Matthew 18:21

Matthew 18:15-17, 21-35 Ephesians 4:25-5:2a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The cover of today's worship bulletin includes a verse from our Epistle Reading, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another*, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:32). While today's emphasis will be on the topic of forgiveness, I realized how the entire passage fits so well into our recent exploration of how we are called to live together in unity as a community of faith. Therefore, before jumping into the imperative to forgive one another, let me summarize another one of the apostle Paul's “To Do” lists of living as a beloved community.

- Put away falsehood and speak truth to our neighbors.
- Be angry but do not sin.
- Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up.
- Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice.
- Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving.
- Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loves us.

There is an entire sermon in each of those important imperatives. Yet, given our Gospel Reading's emphasis on the topic of forgiveness, that's where I want to direct our attention today. **Of all the things we are called to be and do as those who strive to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus, perhaps the one we commonly struggle with most, besides loving our enemies, is forgiveness.** Added to that, there are different understandings of what forgiveness actually is, and what it entails.

The first portion of our reading from Matthew 18, verses 15-17, give actual instructions in dealing with another member of the community of faith who has wronged you. The first step, one that is often neglected, and often even harder to do, is, “If one sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (18:15). **Steve Garnaas-Holmes** released a poem this week dealing with this passage, entitled, “Go to them”. He writes:

Go To Them

Talk *with* people, not about them.

Don't underestimate the power of this challenge.

To do this you stand on your own legs.

You renounce having others speak for you.

You take responsibility for your feelings

and don't sublet them for another to control.

You honor your heart, your experience and its integrity.
 You rely on God's grace rather than your own comfort.
 You trust your worth regardless of another's reaction,
 your belovedness regardless of others' discomfort.
 You free yourself from imagining
 that you can manage another's discomfort.
 Knowing your dignity is untouched,
 you subject it to your love.
 You express your love for them
 by not shielding them from the truth.
 You respect them by not speaking ill of them to others.
 You go to where you know you may have to forgive.
 You open yourself to hearing how you also have sinned.
 You open the door to reconciliation,
 which opens no other way.

To be so honest, so forthright, gently but clearly,
 you are transparent to the gospel.
 You are free, and not afraid.
 You are light and not shadow.

This approach, talking directly with the one who has hurt you, may just be what some of us need to hear this day.

Many of you are familiar with the name **Rabbi Harold Kushner**. He's best known as the author of the classic best-selling 1978 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In 1999, Kushner wrote an article for *Spirituality & Health* magazine entitled, "**Letting Go of the Role of Victim.**" A story he tells is quite illuminating as it pertains to the importance and impact of forgiveness. I have shared this with you before, but it bears repeating. He writes:

A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?"

I answer her, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. **I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry person.** I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. **You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself.**"

Who really benefits from forgiveness? More often it is the one who is hurt and then forgives, not the one who needs to be forgiven. **It is now widely understood that unforgiveness, the holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply impacts our emotional and spiritual well-being, and often even our physical health.** Earlier in this service of worship, the last line in our unison Prayer of Confession included the request to God, "Hear now our silent prayers of reflection and confession, **including those we need to forgive...**" **Were you able to think of anyone in particular?** You may have

thought of someone near and dear to you, perhaps a close or distant relative, or someone at work, school, or at an organization in which you are a member. Perhaps it's that person who cut you off in traffic. Perhaps it's someone from the other side of the political or religious spectrum. Perhaps it's someone in your neighborhood, someone from long ago or from just yesterday. Perhaps it's someone who has passed away.

Perhaps one of the persons on your list that needs forgiveness is yourself. Or, perhaps it's someone from right here in this congregation.

Interestingly, it is this last category, people within our own community of faith – fellow siblings in Christ – that Jesus is specifically referring to in today's Gospel reading from Matthew 18. For no community of faith can be a loving community if it isn't also a forgiving community. The same is basically true when it comes to one's family.

Now, the concept of forgiveness is often misunderstood. We will look at that in a moment. So, let's begin by acknowledging that forgiveness is something that is hard for most of us to both give and receive. We are all aware of the myriad of reasons (perhaps excuses) why we resist forgiving others. On the other hand, there are those who refuse to accept our apology and desire for reconciliation. Sadly, we are sometimes tempted to return the hurt by inverting the Golden Rule in a way that justifies retaliation: "Do unto others as they have done unto you."

In the context of today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives instructions concerning reconciliation and the repairing of broken relationships. It is then that Peter, speaking for the disciples, steps forward to ask for clarification. He asks Jesus, "If another member of the community of faith sins against me, **how often should I extend forgiveness?**" **What Peter really wants to know is where the cutoff point is to when we don't have to forgive another person anymore.** Rather than wait for Jesus to respond, Peter proposes his own answer, "As many as seven times?" Actually, Peter thought that he was being very generous. An ancient Jewish rabbinical standard for forgiveness was only three times. So, Peter (by doubling this amount and adding one more for good measure) was probably looking for an "Attaboy!" from Jesus. But he didn't get one. Instead, Jesus replies with an astoundingly large number, thus impossible to keep track.

The Greek of the biblical text at this point is ambiguous, and can either mean seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, which comes to 490. But the exact number isn't the issue. The point is we are instructed to not keep track at all. I love the way one biblical commentator puts it:

Jesus is not giving a math-lesson, but a grace-lesson! For to keep track of the number of times we forgive another person is *not* to really forgive in the first place, but to record progress toward the day when it's okay to *not* forgive that person anymore.

When it comes to forgiveness, then, Jesus wants us to throw away the calculator and any sort of record keeping. To make his point, Jesus follows his statement to Peter of basically limitless forgiveness with a parable of a servant who was forgiven of an impossibly huge financial debt by the king, but who in turn immediately demands full payment of a small debt owed by a fellow servant. We learn that **persons who are unwilling to forgive do not have a deep understanding in their heart and mind of the generosity, mercy, and grace that God continually extends to them.** So it is with us when we are unwilling to forgive. It is in recognizing God's limitless and gracious forgiveness of ourselves that we, in turn, are enabled, individually and as a community of faith, to engage in the ongoing activity and practice of forgiving one another.

Perhaps it's wise, at this point, to step back a bit and take a good look at what forgiveness is and is not. I have included a **bulletin insert** [see below] with several pertinent quotes on forgiveness that you can take with you and ponder over later. I want to refer to just one at this point from **Fred Rogers** – Mr. Rogers.

Forgiveness is a strange thing. It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than our friends. It can be hardest of all to forgive people we love.

The Greek word translated as 'forgive', literally means, 'release, let go, send away.' Biblical commentator Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn provides a helpful perspective on the meaning of forgiveness when she writes:

Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person's actions or attitudes in our lives.

Forgiveness is also not a matter of putting other persons on probation, waiting for them to do something wrong so we can take it back. **Forgiveness is not an excuse for unjust behavior, and to forgive is not necessarily to forget.**

It's true, many events and situations should *not* be forgotten. But as in the opening story told by Rabbi Kushner, forgiveness allows us to not let the offender live in our head and turn us into bitter, angry, and resentful people. Therefore, when you find yourself consumed by these negative feelings, forgiveness may just be the solution.

Our attitude and practice of forgiveness, then, is ultimately not for the *other* person's sake, but for **our own personal well-being, our healing and wholeness**, and for the well-being of a family or a community of faith, or maybe even a nation. Yes, I will agree that when we are wronged **there is a tension between seeking justice and offering forgiveness. But this isn't an either/or proposition, but rather, like most things, a both/and.**

Remember, **forgiveness is not a matter of being indifferent to wrong, or letting the other person "off the hook," or saying what they did no longer matters, or that the offender isn't responsible for the consequences of their own actions and the pain they caused.** But if we really want inner spiritual health and an increasing ability to love one another, which the apostle Paul reminds us is the true debt we owe others, then you and I must learn to forgive – even seventy times seven. **For there is freedom in forgiveness!**

Now ask yourself: **Is there someone the indwelling Spirit of God is calling on you to forgive?**

Amen.

Resources:
Thomas Long, *Matthew Feasting on the Word*