

A Community of Forgiveness

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

Matthew 18:15-17, 21-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Many of you are familiar with the name of Rabbi Harold Kushner. He's perhaps best well 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 issue of the importance of forgiveness. 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 woman.** 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.

The medical and scientific world has also begun to delve into the importance of forgiveness for health and well-being. It is now widely known that unforgiveness, or holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply affects our emotional and even physical health.

Earlier in this morning's 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 come up with any names?** Some of you may have thought of someone near and dear to you, someone at work, school, or at an organization in which you are a member, someone in your neighborhood, someone from your distant past or from just yesterday, someone who has passed away. Or, **perhaps one of the persons on your list that needs forgiveness may be yourself. And just maybe it is someone right here in this congregation.**

Interestingly, it is this last category, people within our own community of faith – fellow brothers and sisters in Christ – that Jesus is specifically referring to in today's Gospel reading from Matthew 18. For it is a fact that **no community of faith can be a loving community if it isn't also a forgiving community.**

Before we get too far into this topic, however, let us acknowledge that **forgiveness is a difficult issue, primarily because it demands so much of us. The concept of forgiveness itself may also be 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. In fact we are often tempted to return the hurt by inverting the Golden Rule to, "Do unto others as they have done unto you." Perhaps, then, we can learn something that will help us in this regard from today's Gospel's reading.

The latter portion of today's text, which deals with the call for limitless forgiveness (an issue we will explore in just a moment), is preceded by an issue regarding the handling of conflicts that arise between individuals within the community of faith. Now I know that it may be a shock for some of you to learn that conflicts do indeed arise within a congregation. But this part of the text reveals the reality of conflicts within the community, and how they can negatively impact the building up of the community of faith.

In other words, **we are never to ignore the deep pain of those who have been sinned against, and we cannot minimize the difficulties of forgiveness.** In fact, **reconciliation** is possible only when it is part of a process that includes:

- naming the sin
- repentance of the sinner
- the communal support of the victim

We need to understand that **the forgiveness Jesus calls for is inseparable from truth-telling and accountability.** It is in this context following Jesus' instructions concerning the repairing broken relationships that Peter, speaking for the disciples, steps forward to ask for clarification. He asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the community of faith sins against me, **how often should I extend forgiveness?**" What Peter really wants to know is if there is a statute of limitations on sin. 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 rabbinical standard for forgiveness was only three times. I bet Peter was looking for an "Attaboy!" from Jesus. But he didn't get one. Instead, Jesus replied with an astoundingly large number. The Greek 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. Either way, the number is enormous and intentionally exaggerated. **The point is that 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. **The motive for record keeping, you see, is not reconciliation but a future time when we can retaliate and get our vengeance. When it comes to forgiveness, then, Jesus wants us to throw away the calculator. But that really goes against the grain, doesn't it!** We may be willing to forgive someone once or twice, but we can't be expected to forgive over and over and over again, can we?

Jesus follows his statement to Peter of limitless forgiveness with a **parable** of a servant who was forgiven of an impossibly huge debt by the king, but who in turn immediately demands full payment of a small debt owed by a fellow servant. The point is that persons who are unwilling to forgive have no sense in their heart or mind of the generosity, mercy, and graciousness that was and is shown to them by God. So it is when we are unwilling to forgive. We learn, then, that **it is in recognizing God's limitless and**

gracious forgiveness of ourselves that we, in turn, are enabled, as a community of faith, to engage in the ongoing activity and practice of forgiveness.

Perhaps it's wise, at this point, to step back a bit and take a **hard look at what forgiveness is and is not**. The Greek word that we translate 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.** Some events and situations we should *not* forget: the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, exploitation of children and women, mistreatment of Native peoples, the infidelity of a spouse, a lie told that turned your life upside down, abuse, or betrayal. [Let me add that it took over 80 years before Tulsa decided that it shouldn't forget the Race Riot of 1921.]

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. Forgiveness frees us from expending any more of our precious emotional energy and from the toll it takes on us when we are unforgiving.**

Our attitude and practice of forgiveness, then, is ultimately not for the other person's sake, but for our own personal well-being, healing and wholeness, and the well-being of the community. It is in the process of forgiveness that we can 'release, let go, send away' much of our anger, hurt, resentment, bitterness, or feelings of vengeance and retaliation. **Yes, I will agree that when we are wronged there is a tension between justice and forgiveness.** But let us remember that **forgiveness isn't 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 may have caused.**

So as we continue to reflect upon what it means to offer and receive forgiveness, I'd like to leave you with this thought. **If you and I fail to forgive, it does have an effect on the other person, but nothing like the effect it has on us.** If we really want inner, spiritual health and an increasing ability to love, then you and I must learn to forgive – even seventy times seven. Or as Presbyterian preacher Thomas Long puts it, "We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace, and that **forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose.**" What a great image. **Let us be known as a forgiving community!**

Who is the indwelling Spirit of God calling on you to forgive?

Amen.

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