

Wandering Heart: Teach me

“How often should I forgive...?”

Matthew 18:15-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 17, 2024

Forgiveness is the obvious theme in this Gospel passage from Matthew 18, when Peter asks Jesus how often we should forgive another person. We'll get to that important issue of forgiveness in a moment. First, there is another theme introduced by Peter's question itself, the **curiosity and willingness to learn and be taught something new**.

I get a blog from The OHM Store (theohmstore.co), from whom I purchased a handmade singing bowl from Nepal. Every Monday, they release a short devotional entitled, *Start Your Week Mindfully*. The post from Monday of this very week has the heading, “**The Fossilization of Your Mind**”. It speaks quite bluntly to those of us who pride ourselves in our knowledge, and that we are correct. Here's the devotional.

Knowing things may not be all it's cracked up to be.

A belief that you **already know** could block you from seeking new insight and information.

Knowing makes you a fossil, rather than a living-breathing spirited being, capable of exceptional levels of growth and change.

Fossils are unchanging. Perpetually in a state of sameness for millions of years. Desperately fighting to preserve their sameness.

Stuck. Hardened. Unmoving. Unyielding.

I **already know** how to eat well.

I **already know** what I like to do in my spare time.

I **already know** what makes me happy.

Do you?

Or could it be possible, that you “have a current level of understanding,” that you could easily amend or alter should you find new insight or new information.

An interesting experiment for today... Pretend for one second that you don't already know.

Go find out. Go digging. Be an explorer for the unseen, unread, unheard, and yet to be experienced adventure.

To exploring what we think we know.

A bit of a daunting question for each of us this day, therefore, is this: **How teachable are you, and I?** One of the things many **exvangelicals** (that's a new term I

just learned for **ex-evangelicals**), have realized is that **some of what they (including some of us) were taught they must believe has morphed into a different understanding – once new information is presented and thoughtfully considered.** The same applies to most all who now identify as progressive Christians.

Our Lenten resource material from A Sanctified Art connects this theme of being willing to be taught something new when Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. They write:

In this scripture, we see a version of Peter who is hungry to learn. His posture is humble and open—he wants to absorb Jesus' teachings like a wet sponge. He asks a question and might expect a straightforward answer: "**How many times should I forgive?**" Instead, **Jesus' math is not predictable—it's infinite. Forgiveness is abundant; grace is not earned.**

Then they ask something we each should seriously ponder. "In your own faith, do you find comfort in theological formulas? Do you wish for straightforward answers? Can you let go of black-and-white thinking and instead embrace the infinite colors of grace?" In today's culture that could be rephrased as: **Can you let go of binary thinking and instead embrace the spectrum of non-binary?** Here's something else we are asked to consider. "**Is forgiveness something you can comprehend intellectually? Perhaps it must be lived and embodied. Perhaps we must experience it for ourselves in order to understand.**"

So let us take a closer look at the issues of teachability and forgiveness. Resource biblical commentator, **Dr. Terence Lester**, offers the following.

In Matthew 18:15-22, **Jesus teaches about community and repair.** Peter, eager to learn, asks him a follow-up question. Jesus gives an expansive answer, emphasizing the abundance of forgiveness. This story shows the importance of asking questions and expanding our faith, especially when we're comfortable not having all the answers and we're open to seeing the world in more nuanced ways.

Jesus' response to Peter's question about forgiveness highlights the ambiguous math of grace. **Peter learns about abundant grace. It's about letting go of rigid limits and embracing the limitless possibilities of forgiveness and repair.** ...where one act of faith [can lead] to forgiveness and transformation, Jesus' teachings remind us of the power of forgiveness to make the community whole... **Repair is vital, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others.**

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* has an entire section on Church Discipline. Rather than being based on seeking punishment, the process is guided by the hope of restoration – of repair – for both the offender and the one offended. That does not mean, however, the offending person doesn't have to face the consequences of their actions, thus possibly requiring disciplinary action. After all, justice is sought – and yes, for all involved and affected. It does highlight, though, forgiveness isn't always easy, either to give or to receive.

Let's make no mistake about it, **forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is the way we are called to be in relationship with one another.** In fact, forgiveness is a crucial element in what makes it possible for us to live together as a beloved community.

Let's take a closer look, then, at what forgiveness is and is not. **The Greek word translated as 'forgive', literally means, 'release, let go, send away'. Forgiveness, therefore, is not carelessness or indifference to wrong. It is not permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards.** 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.** [There are many things, for instance, for which we must never forget.]

There's a **comic strip written by Pat Brady entitled, *Rose Is Rose***. In one of these cartoons, Rose, the mom of the family, is pictured in the first panel as sitting in a dungeon with a large ball and chain clamped to her leg. She is angry. There is a dark cloud over her head. In the second panel her expression changes and the dark cloud is replaced with the word "Sigh." In the third panel the dungeon has been transformed into a rainbow with birds singing, and butterflies flapping. The ball and chain are gone and Rose is dancing with a big smile on her face. In the fourth and final panel Rose goes up to her husband, who is engrossed in his newspaper, and tells him, "Well it wasn't easy, but I have decided to forgive you."

Who really benefited from the forgiveness? Was it the husband, the one who needed to be forgiven? Or was it Rose, the one who was hurt? It was Rose whose anger had imprisoned her, whose resentment had turned her world dark. It was Rose whose bitterness was a ball and chain around her. **Who benefits most from forgiveness? The one who does the forgiving. And let's not forget that often we need to forgive ourselves.**

May we, as this community of faith, recognize and embody what it means to be **a community of the forgiven and of the forgiving – to extend grace to one another time after time after time after time...**

In the process, like Peter, let us keep asking questions with an open mind and spirit, **willing to be taught new ways of thinking, acting, and engaging in the world.**

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, *Wandering Heart: Figuring out faith with Peter*, Lent 2024.