

A Community of Forgiveness

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

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

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Earlier in this morning's service, the last line in our unison Prayer of Confession included the request to God, “Hear, now, our silent prayers for forgiveness, 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. Maybe it is someone at work, or at an organization in which you are a member. It may be someone in your neighborhood. Maybe it's someone from your distant past or from just yesterday. Perhaps it may even be someone who has passed away. Or perhaps one of the persons on your list needing 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 Lesson 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.**

But before we get too far into this topic, let us acknowledge that **forgiveness is a difficult issue**, primarily because it demands so much of us. It may also be misunderstood. Forgiveness is something that is hard for many of us to both give and receive. Perhaps, then, we can learn something that will help us in this regard from today's Gospel's lesson.

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 church. Now I know that it may be a shock for some of you to hear that conflicts do indeed arise within a congregation.

In our efforts to avoid confrontation, we often try to ignore conflicts or try to sweep them under the rug. But ultimately, this often causes more harm than good. For even minor offences can become a source of resentment and bitterness.

Jesus, however, makes it perfectly clear that no effort is too great when trying to restore peace in the church. When relationships are strained with fellow church members, or even broken, we are instructed **to face the issues straight on, the goal being reconciliation and the healing of relationships.**

According to this text, in what may seem to be a bit of a twist, it is the one who is wronged – the victim – who is to take the initiative to seek out the offender in order to resolve the conflict. So when you or I feel we have been wronged or offended by another, we are not to sulk, or gossip, but to confront. Yet this implies the type of confrontation that is designed to win the offender back, not drive him or her further away. So this must be handled with much grace, gentleness and humility. Biblical commentator Richard Donovan approaches this difficult issue this way:

Discipline is not a popular concept these days. We have a live-and-let-live attitude that is uncomfortable with the idea that anyone has a right – much less a responsibility – to discipline anyone else.

Parents feel that they should be encouragers rather than rebukers. We have stripped teachers of their disciplining authority. We resent encroachments on our freedom. We say, ‘Who are you to judge?’

But early Christians were much more aware of the interactive function of behavior. Serious misconduct, for example, was perceived by spiritual leaders as by no means a private matter but as a cancer threatening the body of Christ.

Donovan states, “You know, if we were all angels, discipline would be unnecessary – but we are not angels.”

Even the Apostle Paul confessed that he often found himself doing what he knew to be wrong and failing to do what he knew to be right (Romans 7:15-20).

Throughout the gospels it is made clear that Jesus does not want to leave the wound untended, whether we inflicted the wound or are among those who have been wounded. In no uncertain terms, then, Jesus teaches us that we simply cannot ‘write off’ a fellow child of God. **Jesus wants us to take the time and energy necessary to be reconciled to one another. It’s that simple. That doesn’t mean, however, that it’s necessarily easy.**

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes Hell as a dark, large city where everyone lives on the fringes. They do so because they had a quarrel and moved out. They had another quarrel and moved out again. They had another quarrel and moved even further. Lewis concluded that Hell is larger because people choose distance instead of communication, confrontation, and prayer.

Returning, now, to our biblical text, no sooner has Jesus outlined the process for repairing broken relationships in the community of faith than 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.

The ancient rabbinical standard for forgiveness was only three times. I'm sure Peter was looking for an "Attaboy!" from Jesus, but he didn't get one.

Instead, Jesus replied with a number that totally blew Peter's out of the water. 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, intentionally exaggerated, and 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 get our vengeance and retaliation. **When it comes to forgiveness, then, Jesus wants us to throw away the calculator.**

Talk about going against our grain! 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? **It's a whole lot easier to nurse grudges than take the steps that led to forgiveness and reconciliation.**

I want to pause at this point, because I think it is very appropriate, and necessary, to ask: **What does it mean to forgive?** The Greek word that we translate as 'forgive', literally means, '**release, let go, send away.**' It carries the literal connotation of releasing a person from indebtedness. Hence the line in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, and we forgive our debtors." This has the effect of releasing our sense of power and control over someone who is indebted to us [sinned against].

This is emphasized in the parable that Jesus goes on to tell of a king who cancels the debt of a servant who owed him the modern-day equivalent of billions of dollars. This can be interpreted as **God forgiving each one of us all of our countless sins and wrongs.**

But shockingly, the parable continues with the servant, whose astronomical debt was just forgiven by the king, refusing to forgive a fellow servant of the relatively small debt that he is owed. The point is the dramatic contrast between the large and small debts – and between the king's enormous act of mercy and compassion, and the first servant's complete lack of mercy compassion.

This parable illustrates, then, why Jesus can require limitless forgiveness from us: because we have been, and continue to be, infinitely forgiven by God.

The problems raised by this biblical text in Matthew, however, are both numerous and serious. Does Jesus require that we place ourselves completely at the mercy of an uncaring and unrepentant sinner? Does Jesus eliminate 'tough love' solutions to such problems as abuse and addictions? Does the forgiveness that Jesus requires of us lead to a kind of passivity that makes us the equivalent of a doormat? No. No. And no.

When it comes to such heinous sins, such as violent physical abuse for example, some cannot find it in their hearts to forgive the abuser. **I have read articles that state that we do not have to forgive someone who is unrepentant.**

The argument goes like this: until abusers (or any sinner) has “re-thought” their actions and come to recognize them as sins against God and against others and repent of those sins, then the victim does not need to be forgiving.

Speaking personally, **I tend to agree with the other side of this discussion that says that as Christians we do need to be forgiving towards all who have sinned against us whether or not they are repentant.** And this is why I believe that.

Our attitude of forgiveness is ultimately not for the other person’s sake, but for our own well-being. (This may seem selfish or self-serving, but it’s not.) This seems to be Matthew’s emphasis, and modern psychology backs this up. **Holding a deeply held grudge affects you and me more than the person we’re holding a grudge against.**

Forgiveness is primarily for our own healing. It can help remove, for instance, much of our inner turmoil and desires for revenge or retaliation. **Forgiveness, then, helps us to ‘release, let go, send away’ much of our anger, hurt, resentment, bitterness, or feelings of vengeance.** When we are able to do this, then we become able to not let past sinful behaviors determine how you and I will act and feel in the present. **And by forgiving, we can find release from the enormous emotional energy and strain that it takes to not forgive.**

Agreed, 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 their own actions and the pains they may have caused.

As I’m sure you can tell, this text raises about as many questions as it answers concerning our life together as children of God. Perhaps it’s enough at the moment to come to the realization that **all of us fail to be as merciful and forgiving as God requires of us towards each other.**

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 has 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. Forgiveness changes us as individuals and as a community, because we learn, by forgiving and being forgiven, to live with others.

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.”

Who do you need to forgive?

Amen.