

Did you hear the psalmist clearly this morning? “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, for as far as the east is from the west, so far the Lord removes our transgressions from us.” We worship a forgiving God, a merciful and gracious God. A God who is slow to anger and ready to wrap us in steadfast love. Yes, we worship a God who willingly forgives, anticipating, hoping that we will forgive others as we have been forgiven.

As we turn to our text from the Gospel of Matthew this week, context, as I remind us often, is important. Our text comes on the heels of Jesus’ explanation of church discipline, answering the question: What do we do when a member of the church sins against us? Jesus lays out a plan to address the offender: first, one on one; then two or three on one; then the church on one; and finally, censure, if the offender does not listen even to the church. The process to address an offender is time consuming and painstaking. So, it should not surprise us that our text addresses the question, “So, how many times do we have to do this with a member who continues to sin against us?”

How many times? Let’s listen for God’s word to us today from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

<sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

<sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’

<sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

If I asked you to put together a list of those who had hurt or wronged you over the years, my guess is that many of us would be able to produce a mental list fairly easily. It might have been the time when your spouse forgot a special occasion or when your sibling pulled a dirty prank on you. It might have been when a coworker took credit for your work product or a friend betrayed your trust. It might have been words that cut deeply or bruises that were not easily disguised. It might have been an attack on your integrity or deliberate show of force to humiliate you. Hurts, wrongs, sins against us as individuals, can have a long and storied history, with the aftermath often lingering for weeks, years and maybe even a lifetime.

Suffering hurts or wrongs, sins against us can also be communal in nature and this in particular, is the context of our passage from Matthew's Gospel. Can you remember a time in a faith community, when hurtful words were exchanged between vying factions? It might have been over the selection of music for worship or during a project such as a sanctuary remodel. It might have been over a particular mission focus or a specific point of doctrine. It might have been inflammatory conversations about a staff person or even a pastor.

It's obvious from Jesus' teachings that everything is not right in the church. Differences of opinions have escalated into personalized attacks, where he said and she said are at odds. The last time we hear from the disciples in Matthew's text, until Peter speaks up again this morning, is when the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Who is greatest? Sounds so American, with our propensity as a culture to vie for being the best, the smartest, the biggest, the greatest! Who is the greatest? Is it me? Remember the brothers who asked to sit at the right and the left side of Jesus in glory? Of course, answering who is greatest, naturally leads to other judgments, such as who is in and who is out, who is less than or more than, who is right and who is wrong. As commentator Jill Duffield writes, "We never seem to outgrow our childish ways of judging, although we change the categories we count and measure, sift and separate, even in the church.

Church history is littered with fractures, including the most recent one in our denomination in the past couple of years over the issue of ordination, albeit not always clearly stated this way. Speaking from my personal experience as a past member of Los Ranchos Presbytery, it was a painful experience, as people of faith shared hurtful words with each other. As part of a team for a local church desiring to separate itself from the denomination, I endured hurtful statements about my own faith and the denomination I chose to remain a part of, from the elders of that particular church. I know this has been a painful experience for those directly involved within Riverside Presbytery as well, and there still are a few churches desiring to leave this Presbytery, so the wounds are still fresh.

The fracturing of our nation, as hate escalates, and the gulf between red and blue, right and left, conservative and progressive, and who is in and who is out becomes ever more real, leaves dreamers worrying if they will be deported to a country they have never known. Communal hurts within the church and within states, nations, and around the globe are real; and healing wrongs isn't as simple as saying, "We're sorry."

Church history is bloodied with disagreements gone wrong, so how can we possibly hear Jesus' words to Peter as a sign of hope? "Jesus said to Peter, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, as the Greek is not clear.'" I can read the thought bubble over Peter's head, "Wasn't seven times generous enough, Jesus?" Yet, Jesus implies by his numeric answer an emphatic, "No!" Forgiveness is not something to be counted, Peter; it is to be an essential practice of my followers implies Jesus.

Jesus drives this point home with a parable, "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king..." So, who did you identify with when this parable was being read earlier? Were you the king or the poor servant that got thrown in jail by a peer or one of the slaves reporting the ungrateful servant or maybe just an observer to the action? I'm sure none of us naturally identified with the ungrateful servant, for who after being extravagantly forgiven proceeds to be unforgiving? The heart piercing message of this parable though comes as Jesus concludes his parable stating that God will be as forgiving as we are forgiving. Ouch!

How forgiving are you? How forgiving are we as a church? Is forgiveness an essential practice for us as community of faith?

Before we dive into what forgiveness is, let me share with you what forgiveness is not. Dr. Henry Lamberton shared this list during his presentation at the Christian Counseling Center this past Wednesday morning. His presentation was timely, given my sermon topic for today! Here is what he shared: Lewis B. Smedes writes that forgiveness *is not **Forgetting**, is not **Reconciliation**, is not **Condoning**, is not **Dismissing** or is not **Pardoning***. Let me explain these a little more.

- Forgetting – deep hurts can rarely be wiped from one’s memory.
- Reconciliation – reconciliation requires two or more people, but an injured party can forgive an offender without reconciliation.
- Condoning – forgiveness does not excuse bad or hurtful behavior.
- Dismissing – forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant, as if it did not happen.
- Pardoning – is a legal transaction that releases the offender from the consequences of an action, whereas forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense.

According to Smedes, a renowned Christian author, ethicist and theologian in the Reformed tradition, forgiveness is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you.

When we hold a grudge, when we harbor resentment, when we plot revenge, when we even turn a cold shoulder to the one who has wronged us, we, not the wrong doer, is held captive. We allow the perpetrator to hold an immense amount of power over our lives, while the perpetrator remains oblivious to the pain of our prison.

Dr. Lamberton shared a video resource that was incredibly powerful, as it chronicled the power of forgiveness in the context of a community, including the response of the Amish community to the horrific school shooting on October 2, 2006, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The narrator commented that forgiveness was a possibility for the Amish, because it was an essential practice of their community. Forgiveness wasn’t an option for them, it was a natural outcome of their beliefs in a forgiving God, a God who had extravagantly forgiven each of them, as the king did of the first servant in the parable this morning.

It’s important though, as Smedes reminds us, that when we forgive, such as in the case of the Amish, “We do not excuse evil, we do not tolerate it, we do not smother it. We look the evil in the face, call it what it is, let its horror shock and stun and enrage us, and only then do we forgive it.” Forgiveness is an essential practice for the Christian community, yet it is not forgetting or condoning, dismissing or pardoning. Forgiveness is an essential practice that takes time to implement.

We have heard what forgiveness is not, so now let me share what Smedes outlines as a three-part definition of forgiveness. Knowing what forgiveness is, may help us determine if forgiveness is taking root within us for a wrong we have endured.

- *First, we surrender the right to get even with the person who wronged us.* It is in letting go of returning hurt for hurt that allows forgiveness to begin to take root.

- *Next, we reinterpret the person who wronged us in a larger format or context...* I remember Miroslav Volf sharing about this at the Bridges of Peace conference last November, as he recounted his story of being interrogated as a prisoner of the state. His book entitled, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* explores remembering rightly as a way that helps us discover the humanity of the perpetrator. This past week, his work came to mind again, as I read an article about Madhumita Pandey's research in The Washington Post. She is a 22-year-old graduate student who has interviewed over 100 convicted rapists in her country of India. She writes, "When I went to research, I was convinced these men are monsters. But when you talk to them, you realize these are not extraordinary men, they are really ordinary. What they've done is because of upbringing and thought process." Forgiveness begins to take root, as we seek to reinterpret the person who wronged us in a larger context, as a fallible human being in a real cultural context. This doesn't excuse the behavior, but it humanizes rather than dehumanizes the perpetrator.
- *Lastly, we develop a gradual desire for the welfare of the person who wronged us.* When you recall those, who hurt you and begin to feel the power to wish them well, forgiveness is taking root. Richard Rohr, a globally recognized ecumenical teacher, a Franciscan, elaborates on this saying, "True forgiveness does not leave the offender feeling small and judged, but liberated and loved."

Smedes reminds us in his book entitled, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, that "forgiving does not erase the bitter past." That is, "A healed memory is not a deleted memory." Forgiving is not forgetting, yet forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. "Remembering rightly," as Volf coins, "We [can] change the memory of our past into a hope for our future."

The forgiven servant's future was bright. He had not been sold, together with his wife and children and all of his possessions. He was set free, free to love his wife, free to raise his children, free to enjoy his possessions and begin again with hope for a future free from debt. Yet, the extravagant forgiveness he received didn't translate into an essential practice for his own life. Forgiven and freed, he went out, and immediately came upon a fellow slave who owed him a pittance compared to his forgiven debt. Yet, he seized his fellow slave by the throat and demanded payment. When the fellow slave pleaded for mercy, as he had with the king, he refused to be moved with compassion and mercy. He threw his fellow slave into the debtors' prison.

Do you remember me asking who you identified with in this parable? Well, if truth be told we are all more often than not this unforgiving slave. We forget what the psalmist so clearly articulated about the grace we have all received, for "as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us, because God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." God, like the king in the parable has compassion on us. God knows we can never pay our debt.

Yet, is forgiveness, as hard as it is and as long and arduous as the road can be, an essential practice for you, for me and for us as a community of God's people?

The parable has an ominous ending, for the king summoned the unforgiving servant and said, "You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked you for mercy?"

Shouldn't we be compelled to be merciful?

I don't know what prison walls you in. I don't know what hurts still hold sway over your lives. But, I will challenge you through God's word this morning to begin to do the work of forgiveness, for we are forgiven people. As a community of faith, are there prisons we have constructed that we need to unlock?

Forgiveness is a road to freedom and hope. Although forgiveness does not change the past, it enlarges the future. May our forgiving God, give us the strength to make forgiveness an essential practice of our individual and communal lives, enlarging our future with hope. Amen.