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Providence Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 6, 2026
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

"Time to Forgive"

A story is told of a popular preacher who got sick one Sunday morning. He called a good friend who was a retired minister and asked if he would preach the service for him. The substitute agreed but felt inadequate in filling in for such a good preacher, especially on such short notice. When he entered the pulpit, he struggled for a metaphor that would express his humility in his task. "I feel inadequate in taking the place of your fine pastor this morning," he said. "He is such a good preacher and brings light just like the sunlight through a clean pane of glass. I, on the other hand, am like the piece of cardboard that you have substituted for the pane in the window." He went on to preach a pretty good sermon.

As he greeted the parishioners at the front door, one little lady gushed, "Preacher, you're no cardboard; you're a real pane." At the risk of being a real pain, I'm going to preach about forgiveness.

Today's passage from Matthew speaks very clearly and very pragmatically about forgiveness in the church. In spite of the fact that some people think Jesus was idealistic and full of fluffy notions about life that have nothing to do with reality, the advice he offers in this passage is very practical. Perhaps people say things like, "That's impractical," when they really mean something like, "If I did that, I'd have to change and I don't want to change." They anxiously reassure themselves that what they are being asked to do is "idealistic," meaning that it's really not meant to be put into practice.

Today's scripture is not the least bit idealistic. It is all very practical, excruciatingly practical. And that's just the problem. Jesus says, when someone sins against you, go and tell the offender. We, as the offended person, must take the initiative to work it out. But our tendency is to expect the perpetrator to apologize.

Jesus says it's up to us to start the reconciliation. If that fails, take two or three people with you to seek reconciliation. If that fails, tell it to the church and let the church intervene to work it out. And if that fails, Jesus says to "treat them like a Gentile or tax collector." But, remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors? He included them even in his inner circle.

Jesus didn't say to tell your three best friends about how awful the other person is.

He said to call the church into action. Too often our usual way of dealing with conflict is “fight or flight,” either to ignore it or go into full battle mode. It seems easier to us either to go nuclear or get passive, neither of which bring about reconciliation.

Jesus’ focus is on reconciling with those who sin against us not exacting retribution or cutting them off completely. Now, I want to add that this advice from Jesus has to do with sinfulness within the church. Jesus knew that the church would be full of sinners and gave instructions to his followers on how to reconcile. Within the church our goal with one another is to be reconciled.

Today's gospel comes from the church's infancy when the church was convinced that division in the church was deadly, that reconciliation is too important to be left up to chance. So, specific, practical, step-by-step direction is given to achieve reconciliation.

Think for a moment about some offense you have suffered. Remember the details of the sin - how much it hurt and how unfair it was. Now imagine yourself forgiving the person who wronged you. It's not easy, is it? It's tough to forgive, isn't it? And yet that is exactly what Jesus commands us to do here. We are not told to do it if we feel like it. We are told to take the initiative and attempt to work out reconciliation.

How is that possible? I think it is possible only for those who know what it's like to be forgiven. Everything Jesus asks us to do is set against the backdrop of God's forgiveness of us. When we pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," we acknowledge that God first forgives us so that we can in turn forgive others.

It's an occupational hazard for us preacher-types to present the gospel as if Christians are people who are eager to forgive, just dying to do good. Yet the reality is that Christians (including preacher-types) are not tingling masses of people who are ready to do a good deed or to forgive their enemies. Before there is any talk in the Lord's Prayer about forgiving others, we are made to ask for forgiveness for ourselves. Before there is any consideration of the wrongs we have suffered, we are made to ponder the great wrong God has suffered by our deeds and misdeeds.

The Lord's Prayer rightly assumes that we do have debts. Our books are in the red, as far as our relationship with God is concerned. I understand that when some bankruptcy courts begin, and before a particular case is to be heard, the bailiff cries out, "All debtors rise." If we were to do that in worship, we would all have to rise. Not one of us could remain seated.

Yet we are also taught that Christ's death upon the cross accomplishes what we simply cannot accomplish on our own. Jesus' death erases our debt to God. We are forgiven and can now become forgivers. Those who have experienced forgiveness are the ones who are best able to forgive. This is nothing like the "I'm OK, you're OK" business that was so popular in the

seventies, which said, essentially, "I'll stay out of your life and affirm you if you promise to do the same for me. Christian forgiveness is not cheap or easy.

Rather, in our being forgiven and forgiving, we are made a part of God's new reality, what we call the kingdom of God, where we become part of God's ultimate defeat of the powers that would otherwise dominate our lives. If you have ever been forgiven by someone, you know the way in which that forgiveness frees you. If you have ever forgiven someone who wronged you greatly, you know how such forgiveness is not cheap and how forgiving someone who has wronged you is a way of breaking the hold of that wrong upon your life. You can breathe.

More important even than this freedom and grace which comes from forgiveness, is the realization that, in our forgiveness of those who have trespassed against us, we participate in some of the divine energy that was released into the world when God in Christ forgave us for what we did to God's Son. With the command to forgive and reconcile, Jesus has essentially written forgiveness into our by-laws.

Every once in a while, you see two signs set near one another that are not intended to be read together but which do make sense. Back when I was a pastor in San Francisco, I was amused to see a sign for a storage facility underneath a sign for a cemetery. The double message presented was: "Woodlawn Cemetery and the storage facility message, "Space Available." Another double message occurred on a bulletin board for a Baptist church which was next to the church I pastored in Oregon. The bulletin board which advertised the pastor's sermon and a church function read, "God's Idea of Hell.....Thursday Choir Rehearsal at 7."

In this passage of scripture there are essentially two signs put together – being forgiven and forgiving. Today's gospel is practical, down-to-earth advice for how we are to embody God's promised kingdom right here in this congregation right now. Jesus has called us to be light to a darkened world. In us, in our life together in the church, the world ought to be able to see God's kingdom breaking out and making a difference.

My dear friend, the Rev. Carroll Pickett, was a chaplain at the Huntsville prison in Texas where executions were carried out. Carroll was a staunch opponent of capital punishment but fulfilled his ministry to the men on death row with grace and dignity. Carroll told me of an occasion when a local prison fellowship group visited the prison where an execution was to take place.

As the group was leaving, they noticed that one of their members was missing. It turned out that he had followed one of the prisoners back to his cell. When they found him, he was sitting in the cell praying with the prisoner who was to be executed that week. "What are you doing?" they asked. "We are under very strict orders not to separate from the group. You could jeopardize our passes in the future." To which the man said, "My name is Judge Brewer.

I'm the judge who sentenced this man. I am here because we both need time to forgive one another."

The same thing can be said by all of us. We need time to forgive one another, and the only way we can do that is because we were first forgiven by God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen