

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
September 17, 2023  
Matthew 18: 21-35

Last week we read two sections in Matthew – one from the sermon on the mount about reconciliation, about leaving your offering at the altar if someone has something against you, and go reconcile first. We talked of this necessary alignment between our worship, or our personal faith, and our relationships and responsibilities towards others. We also read from Matthew 18, the verses that come right before the section Stacey read for us. They talk of reproving and confronting someone who has sinned against you. It describes the effort to confront and correct one another when we sin against each other.

However, we all know that pressing upon another to acknowledge how they have hurt or affected another is not easy, not straightforward. In fact, it can easily go quite poorly. We cannot make someone else change their ways. And how they see and experience things may be altogether different to how you see and experience things. And so, if we have no guarantee to make things right by confronting and changing others, we inevitably come to the question of our passage this morning, the question of how we forgive regardless of other peoples' actions and choices. And furthermore, why should you forgive if it isn't going to change things, if it isn't going to change the other person or the relationship?

The quick answer, I think we all know. We forgive because it changes us. Our poem names this in the first stanza of the poem, of the way forgiveness changes our emotional response as well as those physiological connections.

How does it creep into arteries,  
level blood pressure  
and wipe clean  
the slate of anger  
held close to the chest?

Forgiveness is the choice that affects us and our response to others, to our circumstances, to our past, to the world. Forgiveness leads us deeper into a sense of peace and center.

Now this would be easier if forgiveness was only a periodic thing asked of us, like being bumped into on a busy street, but what about when the demand is routine and regular, offenses stacking up, the layers of hurt and wounds and emotions of anger or sadness or resentment feel like they have seeped into our bones and are now a part of us? It is hard work. It often is a lot more involved than a simple “I forgive you.” Which leads us to Peter’s question.

“How many times should I forgive?” “As many as seven times?,” Peter asks. Seven, being a conventional number, has a sense like if I said, how many times, 10, 20? They are good round representative numbers. And so Jesus’ response has a type of hyperbolic character, playing with that conventional number. He responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Like you answering me, more like a 10 gazillion times. It’s a hyperbolic number that makes you stop counting, because there is no realistic end to it, that it is an ongoing practice, not a once and done once in a while.

Jesus’ quick answer is that you always must forgive. You always must forgive. That feels true. Because you turn around and you hear name, or see a voicemail message on your phone, or have a conversation that takes you back, and there is that feeling, that edge, that emotional imprint. And every time a certain person talks and acts as they do habitually it revives your hurt, a hurt that is invisible to others. Or sometimes, it affects the ways we live without us being aware.

What is forgiveness – it is the capability to let it go, to accept that it won’t be rectified but that it won’t affect your emotional and physical reaction and response any more. Only then can it truly be in the past. That is the litmus test. When you think or talk about what happened, has the energy gone out of it? Or does it still bring with it some feeling, a sinking feeling, an angry reaction, and unwillingness to engage, some energy that tells us all is not healed yet. And sometimes it may not be another person we are forgiving. It may be ourselves. It may be God. It may be life and the way things went that you cannot change.

And how does one forgive? Our poem has something to say about this too, though an answer many of us don’t really want to hear. We tend to want to move on and not talk about it, or if we do want to talk about it, we want to

talk about it in a way that we are constantly licking our wounds, unwilling to change the way we see or feel about it, just wanting to justify ourselves.

But the poet opens the poem with the question, how does forgiveness bring about change in us. And the answer:

Look long into the mirror,  
be tender with the face you see,

Look long at ourselves. And be tender, gentle, suggesting that we are often hard on ourselves, slow to forgive ourselves for our part in whatever needs to be forgiven. And then, she says, Look

~~then~~ to the blistered past,  
the entire landscape,  
the smallest detail  
as in a Brueghel painting,

I had to look up Brueghel. A painter whose works are full of tons of details, lots of little scenes and characters all packed in within the larger work. Look close. Look into your blistered past, into every little detail. How long do you look, how long do you sit with it? Until it starts to shift, and change.

Then revise and revise  
until the story changes shape  
and you, no longer the jailor,  
have learned to love  
what is left.

This is the hard part of real forgiveness, paying attention to it all, until something changes in us. Not just pushing it into the past as if that is enough, because it just pops up here and there if we do. The work of forgiveness and seeking healing is where forgiveness goes from being an intellectual question, a topic of rabbinic debate between Peter and Jesus, to a practice that we engage with. Actual work that we do.

What if you sat down as a starting point and started making lists, of the people and times and moments that still trigger something in you. It may be hurt, or anger, or guilt, or sadness, or frustration, or embarrassment. What if you made a list, an inventory of the work still to be done, to get to a place

there the past is truly able to be in the past, not triggered and resurfacing in the present?

Other practices?

Now to return to our Matthew reading for a moment, Jesus takes Peter's question and launches into a parable – as if to reframe the question as Jesus so often does. And Jesus doesn't go into detail, like the poet does, about how one goes about the process of forgiveness, but he does illustrate what happens when we don't do that work. He illustrates when we just rush on, assuming it is all in the past.

It tells us of a servant who had racked up an insurmountable debt; an amount which is clearly exaggerated, beyond realistic circumstances. Perhaps it is similar to Jesus' first exaggeration, to the seventy times seven, as if to say, there comes a point when there is no use counting; it is more than one could pay, than one could make up for, or undo. It will ruin him, because there is no realistic way to fix it or make it all right.

And furthermore, it is a debt so great that any attempt to recoup would not come even close to satisfying it. So, the Servant pleads for patience, falling on his knees; he pleads for a little leniency, spilling promises of repaying every cent, if he has only just a little more time. Notice, the servant did not really ask for forgiveness, he asked for more time to make it right, unwilling to acknowledge his need for forgiveness. The servant has not really sat with his reality to a point where something could change in him. He is still spilling the same promises, still acting out of the same need to justify himself, the same delusions that have held his world together up to now.

Well as it happens, the King has pity. He forgives. Accepts that it will not be repaid by the servant; he will assume the debt.

We might pause here and ask what change has happened within the servant. There are external changes. He is not going to be sold into servitude or imprisonment along with his family. His life will take another route due to the mercy of the King. But will that route, that change be long-lived? What change has happened within the servant? Does he see or feel himself differently? Has he really processed and been transformed by forgiveness? The answer seems to be that there is no change. He is forgiven, and yet he is living by the same logic and personal truths that he had always clung to, that

he can fix this, that he can make it right on his own, that he can pay it back and justify himself. He is propelled by the same things, same energy, same personal truths and needs.

So, it is no wonder that he expects the same of others who too are in a position of needing forgiveness. For he goes forth, carrying himself, not as one who has been forgiven; he carries himself as one who is determined to overcome his predicament, and therefore demands that others do the same, demands what he has coming from others.

He goes forth and he starts down his list of where he can collect money, and he goes, clinging to his principles, and takes his energy and fury to his fellow slave. He will make things right, even if it means his friends' hide. The fury, fear, and gravity, he channels it all onto his fellow slave, so much so, that the stark comparison of the King's response to his debt and his own response to his fellow slave's debt is a bit dumbfounding, embarrassing, tragic.

And when word gets back to the King, the King is bewildered and furious, that this servant, who was offered a new start, who was granted forgiveness and mercy, would show no hint of such mercy, or kindness toward his fellow slave. And so the parable contains a third summoning, a third determination of payment, a third plea for mercy, and a third judgment rendered.

Now to the question of how we forgive, our parable does offer an answer. It is not just to look long in the mirror at ourselves and at the past, but also to look long at how we have been forgiven, to consider long what the grace of God has done, and might do if we let it. Maybe an opportunity to make another list – to bring to our consciousness the depth of how God has forgiven us.

You see the servant was forgiven, but he had not internalized that forgiveness. It had not changed him yet. He was still being propelled by the past, by old debts, by old personal truths and assessments, by old delusions and embarrassments and the trauma of almost having his family sold off as slaves because of his failures. It is a lot. And none of it was truly dealt with. Which is why he treats others in such a different way than how he was treated. Its what happens we have haven't actually internalized the change, the healing.

This is why forgiveness must become a practice. That we must find practices around forgiveness. Because the intertwined and insurmountable mound of things that require it are too much – both the things we need forgiveness for that we have not fully processed to the point of being changed, and the areas we must forgive that we struggle to do, because the past is still propelling us, causing us to respond and react in different ways.

**Poem:** “*Forgiveness*” by Mary McCue

How does it creep into arteries,  
level blood pressure  
and wipe clean  
the slate of anger  
held close to the chest?

Look long into the mirror,  
be tender with the face you see,  
then to the blistered past,  
the entire landscape,  
the smallest detail  
as in a Brueghel painting,

Then revise and revise  
until the story changes shape  
and you, no longer the jailor,  
have learned to love  
what is left.

And all God’s people said...

## *Forgiveness*

<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.

### *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*

<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.”

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