

What Would It Take to Forgive Others?  
Matt 18:21-22  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 31, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Sometimes we don't get the answers we want to the questions we ask. Like when as kids we asked to go somewhere or do something special and our parents said "no". Or if you say to your tax preparer, "I'll get a refund, right?" and they laugh! A student who had missed class came into my office on Thursday to ask a question and got an answer *he* didn't like! He asked if I would take the day's assignment, late. I asked him to tell me what the assignment said about lateness; he read it. It said, "no late work accepted." I asked him if he understood why I had made that policy; he said, "because we were going to use the assignment *in class*." "Exactly!" I said, affirming his understanding. "But I didn't *come* to class!" he tried. "Exactly," I said again, "which is why I won't accept your assignment." *Not* the answer he had wanted, especially since he had apparently done the work.

Peter asks a question...and gets an answer *he* doesn't want. This very direct, even blunt, exchange between he and Jesus comes in Matthew's gospel amid a collection of "sayings" and parables the author has gathered before moving the story toward Jerusalem and Jesus' final week. Among parables about greatness and conversations about resolving disputes, there is this strong, direct word about forgiveness that troubles us as much as it did Peter. Peter asks the question, assuming he knew the answer. "If another... sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" You see, Peter thinks he is being generous here! Seven times is a lot of times to forgive the same person, after all. So, by offering this number, what was considered the "perfect" number, Peter is pretty confident that his magnanimity will hold him in

good stead, that Jesus will see how generous and kind he is offering to be; he assumes it will be enough.

But, Jesus sees it differently. Just like my student, who thought doing the work was enough, Peter thought offering to go what *he* considered “above and beyond” would be sufficient. But it’s not. Jesus says, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.” (*The Message*) This is *not* the answer Peter was looking for! And who can blame him; when someone has done something that has hurt or offended me, thinking about forgiving them over and over and over, which is what this “seventy times seven” is actually suggesting, does not appeal to me! Do the math: 490 is a lot of forgiving!

But Jesus is clear, and firm. Matthew adds a parable, in an effort to explain this but in my imagination, Jesus pulls Peter aside and says, “Look, Peter: it’s like this. Forgiving isn’t a matter of keeping score or getting what you deserve. ***It’s not a thing we do but a way we are called to be.*** It’s an attitude of the heart and of the spirit. I know it’s hard, and it will get harder. But it’s what we need to be and do.”

Consider this: *Forgiveness isn’t a thing we do but a way we are*, a way demonstrated by Jesus, a way initiated by God.

This is difficult stuff... each week we say these words “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive each other.” Do we really *know* what we are saying? What does it mean? Is it something we actually, *really* want to pray? Do I really want God to forgive me with the exact same amount of forgiveness as I am willing to offer to others? Some weeks that might be ok but not others! Either my sins are going require a whole lot more than that which I have given to others, or at my best I might have some left over!

But Jesus says it's not about the measuring. It's about the being, the doing. "Forgive me just like I forgive others...." The burden there is on me! Because I know that *God's* mercy is endless. We don't say "forgive me like YOU forgive others." *I'm* the one who is directly responsible for my own measure of forgiveness in this prayer we rattle off each week. And truthfully, some weeks I can hardly say it; I need more mercy than I know I have offered to others.

Forgiving others is a complicated matter. We have been hurt, abused, violated. We have been offended, ignored, left out. We have been cheated, betrayed, misunderstood. We have been victimized, hated, discriminated against. We have legitimate reasons to withhold forgiveness from another; we have been mistreated and it seems only right, only fair, only *just*, to punish the offender.

Our litigious cultural defends this position. "Sue them!" is often a first response. We seek "justice" in forms of punishment by taking people to court, locking them up, handing out death penalties, dropping bombs and creating chaos. We may think an "eye for an eye" is old school but it's alive and well in our society as we seek retribution for all that has gone wrong for us. Forgiveness is a 'dirty word.' Only weaklings talk about forgiveness; "give me a gun instead."

But for all those efforts, we find ourselves no farther along the path to full humanity and dignity and peace. The reality is, withholding forgiveness does not punish anyone but ourselves.

The person who has wronged me doesn't even know that I lie awake at night, thinking about what they did and didn't do. The person who excluded me doesn't even know I exist! The one who hurt or abused or violated or betrayed is not wondering how you and I think about them.

They don't think about us at all. We don't forgive for *them*; we do it for ourselves. Jesus knows that when we forgive *them* we free *ourselves* to become more completely like God.

Because surely God's example shows us that waiting for the offender to wake up and take responsibility might never happen! God knows! It takes some of us a good long time, if ever, before we wake up to our own need for God's mercy. But God gives it anyway, always. And so what Jesus tells Peter here, and us, is that we need to think about forgiveness as an attitude we adopt, a world view we inhabit, an action we embody not once or twice, not even seven times, but over and over and over again.... Until it becomes a habit; until it becomes who we are.

Interestingly enough, people *used* to say it took twenty-one days to create a habit (not exactly 7 x 7 but a start 7 x 3!) Nowadays, that hard and fast number has fallen by the wayside in light of newer information about how the human mind and body work in relationship to one another. Regardless of the number of days, what seems to be agreed on is that we need to do the same thing over and over and over again before it begins to take root in us, before it begins to sink in and become a part of who we are, of what we do. When something becomes automatic, when we do it without thinking about it, it's a habit, for better or worse.

The other morning, I needed to alter my usual pattern of driving to Norristown to get the train into the city, so I left myself clues all over the place, including a reminder on my phone because I am pretty much on auto pilot at 5:45 in the morning. So, I got up, got out the door, all the while saying to myself, "you have to drive to school today!" I got into the car, drove away and only three miles down the road did it dawn on me that I was going in the opposite direction of where I should have been, despite my notes and mantra! I was headed to the train and not driving *to school!*

Habits don't happen overnight, and the getting into the habit of forgiving others can take a life time. But before we get discouraged, let's remember why it's important to wrestle with: forgiving others *isn't about their well-being*, it's about our own. It's about releasing the emotional hold someone, or something, has over us and freeing ourselves to move beyond that person or moment.

Let me be clear: *forgiveness isn't about forgetting*. Author Nancy Rockwell reminds us, "Forgiving...is separate from loving the other, separate from liking, separate from restoring trust in relationship, and certainly separate from forgetting. If we make forgiveness a habit, it becomes rooted far deeper inside us than liking, trusting or forgetting can be. And it becomes about loving God and ourselves, not about loving the offender."

Jesus insists we forgive generously because he knows forgiveness' power to change us completely: to release us from the past, from the feelings and experiences that hem us in and tie us up spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, even physically. It is an act of love toward ourselves as we allow ourselves freedom to change and grow, and it is an act of love toward God as we return the gift of mercy God has granted us.

So, what would it take for us to forgive others?

It would take loving yourselves enough to believe you deserve to be freed from the emotional ties that bind you to a past person or event;

It would take recognition of our own need for forgiveness we already have been granted by God.

To forgive others we need to develop a habit of letting go, of releasing what does not serve us or make us more whole; we do this with God's help and with the support of each other.

What would it take for us to forgive others? It would take learning, over time, not to forget but rather to remember: to remember that the deep well of God's compassion and love for us is available to us to offer others. We do not need to generate it ourselves; it already exists.

***Forgiveness is not a thing we do but a way we are called to be.*** It's an attitude of the heart and of the spirit, the heart and spirit of God.