

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

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Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness. Great word. Great concept. We believe in it. We love it. We live it. Right?

Let me begin with a REALLY bad joke. There was a man who loved dogs. He was known far and wide as a dog lover. One day his neighbor watched as he poured a new sidewalk from his house out to the street. About the time he smoothed out the last square of cement, a large dog walked across his sidewalk leaving its footprints behind. The man muttered something under his breath and smoothed out the footprints. He went inside to get some twine to string up around the sidewalk, only to discover, when he got back, NEW dog tracks going in TWO directions on his new sidewalk. He smoothed those out and put up the twine. About five minutes later he looked out and MORE footprints meant that the dog had CLEARED the fence, LANDED on his sidewalk, and kept right on going. The man was MAD now. He troweled the wet concrete smooth again. As he got back to the porch, he saw the dog come over again and sit RIGHT in the MIDDLE of his sidewalk. The man ran out and yelled at the dog and cursed at it. The dog ran away. The neighbor rushed over, "Why did you do that? I thought you loved dogs." The man answered, "I do, I do love dogs, in the abstract, not in the concrete."

It's a real groaner, isn't it? But it makes a point. I think it's the same with forgiveness. We love it in the abstract, but when we actually HAVE something to forgive, we HATE it in the concrete.

Our Gospel today is ABOUT forgiveness. Now I don't know about you, but forgiveness can be a hard topic to swallow sometimes. I say this as someone who has been deeply wounded myself. William Willimon writes:

The human animal is NOT SUPPOSED to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion.

Vengeance, retribution, violence, THESE are natural human qualities. It is NATURAL for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is NOT natural.

He's right of course. There's a part of us, LIKE that unforgiving servant, that wants to find somebody who's wronged us and LITERALLY GRAB them by the throat. Forgiveness – now that's strictly LEARNED behavior.

"How many times SHOULD I forgive?" Peter asks. I'll confess that there are times when I have NOT appreciated Jesus' answer. "SEVENTY-SEVEN TIMES?" There are some people where ONCE is too MUCH. Someone once said, "There are some people I ENJOY NOT forgiving – it ADDS to the pleasure of not LIKING them.

But Jesus links OUR forgiveness from God to forgiving OTHERS – not only in this parable, but in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins, AS we forgive those who sin against us." It isn't that we EARN God's forgiveness by forgiving others; it's much more PERSONAL than that. If we can't BRING ourselves to forgive others, and maybe even forgive ourselves, how are we EVER going to genuinely believe that we've BEEN forgiven by God? We put up a WALL BETWEEN ourselves and GOD, by separating ourselves from a brother or sister. A forgiven person forgives.

The unforgiving servant showed, by his ACTIONS, that even though forgiveness had been offered, he hadn't REALLY accepted it; he hadn't taken it to heart. The servant decided, in EFFECT, that he'd rather have the PUNISHMENT than pass the forgiveness on to another. So let me state this as clearly as possible – you cannot HATE another person and LOVE God. The God who lives IN that

person. I'll say it again. You cannot hate ANY other person in this world, and still say that you love God.

The parable illustrates that, in many ways, forgiving isn't FOR the OTHER person's sake, but for our OWN well-being. The person who injured you may NEVER apologize. They may feel NO remorse. They may not even REMEMBER what they DID to you. So holding on to the resentment, to the grudge, really only affects YOU. As someone once said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the OTHER person to die." Resentment eats away at you and drives you mad. So when you hold on to that anger, that person, and what they did, CONTROLS a part of you. They give them POWER over a part of your heart and mind. Every time that injury comes to mind, they hurt you again and again, over and over and over. As Ann Landers put it, "Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise LIVE rent-free in your head."

And they might not even KNOW or CARE that they hurt us. Why do we DO this to ourselves?

Forgiveness is taking your life BACK and saying I will NOT LET them hurt me anymore. I will forgive, not because THEY are worth it, but because I am. Forgiveness heals US.

When Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he had a question on his mind: "When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela," the former President said, "I woke my daughter at three o'clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event." Then President Clinton zeroed in on his question: "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today," said Clinton. "What was that ABOUT?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken EVERYTHING from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there's nothing LEFT for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to TURN you into their prisoner!'"

In other words, you can never be free to be a whole person until you are able to forgive. Forgiving HEALS YOU.

Forgiveness can remove the RESENTMENT and the TURMOIL and the desire for revenge. Forgiveness is NOT reconciliation; that's something else altogether – forgiveness is simply taking your hand off the other person's throat. And the funny thing is, when you do, you realize that it was YOU who couldn't breathe. It won't make things right, and you may never speak to that person again, but they WON'T be able to HURT you ANYMORE. A memory, without the resentment, is just a memory, and we can LIVE with that.

Patti Davis, the daughter of Ronald Reagan, said that her dad made a lasting impression on her the day after the assassination attempt of 1982. She says, "The following day my father said he knew his physical healing was directly DEPENDENT on his ability to forgive John Hinckley. By SHOWING me that forgiveness is the key to EVERYTHING, including physical health and healing, he gave me an example of Christ-like thinking." Forgiving heals you.

This isn't something that comes to us naturally. It's learned behavior. We can only forgive by the STRENGTH of the one who taught us from a CROSS, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus says here, "Peter you're starting with the wrong question. It's not 'how many times must I forgive?' It's 'How many times have YOU BEEN forgiven?' Start there, Peter, and see what a difference it makes. For your OWN sake, forgive from the heart, as you have BEEN forgiven. Forgiving heals you."

And that, my friends, is VERY CONCRETE. Amen.