

Coping with Chaos: Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35
September 6, 2020

These days of quarantine at home provide us opportunities to spend more time than usual with those who live in our abode, which can be a good thing or it can get on our nerves! With layers of stress weighing upon us, it is easy to become restless and irritable. We tend to take out our frustrations on those around us, even if they are not at fault. At the end of the day I often do an examen, reviewing the day to see how I've responded to God's grace and failed to respond to or denied God's grace. Typically, there are a few, if not several, things I wish I could do over: times when I misspoke, failed to listen, or just plain "blew it." I'm glad that Jesus told Peter that forgiving seven times wasn't adequate, for I need to be forgiven at least 17 and sometimes 77 times a day.

Forgiveness is hard work. Forgiveness is complex and sometimes very complicated. The dialogue between Peter and Jesus offers us an opportunity to consider what forgiveness is not and what it is.

First, forgiveness is not condoning harmful behavior. Sometimes we're afraid that if we forgive an offender, we send the message that what they did was not significant. Harmful, unacceptable behavior is not excused when we forgive another.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We don't need to forget in order to forgive. Some behavior is worth remembering, for if it is repeated, it is an indication of something deeper. Toxic and abusive behavior should prompt us to set up strong boundaries.

This leads to the truth that forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation in the relationship. Forgiveness doesn't mean that everything goes back to the way it always was. It doesn't mean the relationship or the business will continue. Sometimes it is healthier if it ends, or at least takes a new form.

It is also important to realize that forgiveness is different from the matter of justice and consequences. It is okay to call for help when there is violence or abuse. Forgiveness is different from letting the consequences of one's actions catch up with a person.

Forgiveness is not condoning, forgetting, reconciliation, or justice. Now let's consider what forgiveness is.

Forgiveness is personal. We forgive people, not organizations, institutions or faceless groups. If you've been fired from a job, you tend to get angry at the business, but you cannot forgive a company. Someone in that business made a decision. Forgiving is personal. Sometimes we get stuck because we cannot forgive institutions. We forgive people.

Second, forgiveness is a process. When you've been wronged, it is rare to turn around the next minute and immediately offer forgiveness. The process may involve stewing in hurt feelings, considering revenge, allowing time for sharp edges to soften, and personal growth that puts a situation in perspective. Forgiveness is a journey - one step at a time. It need not be rushed. Even entertaining the idea of forgiving an offender may be a radical and brave step.

Forgiveness is hard. Lewis Smedes said, "Forgiving is love's toughest work, and love's biggest risk." It is the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships. We often do everything we can to avoid it! But if we don't move toward forgiveness, our spirit withers.

If you hurt me and I stay angry with you, that's part of the way I protect myself. In refusing to forgive, not only do I punish you; I also keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again. And usually it works. The only glitch is that there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness.

When anger goes untreated, when we fail to find a place of forgiveness, anger turns into resentment. Barbara Brown Taylor calls resentment "arthritis of the spirit."ⁱ It disfigures us. It causes us unnecessary pain.

One reason for moving toward forgiveness is that it is healing for us. The bitterness and resentment we harbor deforms us, like arthritis. When someone is carrying the baggage of unforgiveness, we can often sense their anger and pain, sometimes projected onto others. Unforgiveness is like a boomerang: we use it to protect ourselves, to hurt others so we won't be hurt again, but it has a sinister way of circling back around at us so we become victims of our own inability or unwillingness to forgive.

As I've been talking, I imagine that you've thought of someone you've forgiven or perhaps could forgive. I've pondered a few people as I worked on this sermon. Let's face it, learning to forgive, working toward forgiveness is tough work.

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis wrote, "I used to think that chastity was the most unpopular of all the Christian virtues. But that might not be right...everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea...until they have something to forgive."

Forgiveness is not easy. It is a process, and often takes time. When we are able to offer forgiveness, it is just as freeing for us as it is for the person whom we forgive. In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word forgive has a sense of a deep letting go, a letting go of the mistakes that tie ourselves and others in knots. We know that tension is often carried in our bodies by knots in our muscles. Estrangement from another often feels like a tangled knot that is difficult to unravel.

Jesus tells Peter that he needs to forgive seven times seventy-seven times because he knows that in our human relationships we get tangled up in knots. We disagree, we argue, we have different perspectives. That's human nature. We say things, we do things, we make mistakes that bite, sting and threaten our relationships. Forgiveness is a practice we will need to work on throughout our lifetimes.

If there is a person you are nudged to forgive, be gentle with yourself. Forgiveness is hard and sometimes very complicated. It is a process. Ultimately, forgiveness can be healing not just for one who is forgiven, but also for one who forgives. Setting down the baggage of resentment and untying the knots of bitterness sets us free.

Writer Anne Lamott has said that Earth is Forgiveness School. Forgiveness is the hardest thing we do. She says that half of the stories she wrote in at least one book are about "that predicament of the clenched, clutched feeling when we don't forgive. And then that miracle of grace, like a spiritual WD-40, that gets into the very stuck, grinding places inside of us."ⁱⁱ

May you experience God's grace and forgiveness. When it is healthy and wise, may we have courage to offer grace and forgiveness to others.

Giver of Life, your streams of grace are fresh every morning, gifting us with a new day, reviving our weary souls. Although you are fully aware of our weaknesses and failings, You embrace us with your unconditional love. You prompt our learning and growth, leading us

toward maturity. We are grateful for your forgiving presence, offering us new beginnings time and time again.

We lift to you those rocks of bitterness and resentment that have hardened in our hearts. Hold them with us, smoothing the rough edges and easing the pain and burden. As it is healthy, help us loosen the knots that bind us and free us for peaceful living.

We pray for relationships that are stressed with tension. Massage the wounds within and as healthy, move us toward reconciliation.

We pray for your Spirit's presence in our nation, torn by division in so many ways. Move us to respect the sacred nature of human life. Embolden us to act with kindness and to seek understanding, even if we disagree.

We pray for those suffering the impact of COVID-19, hurricanes, fires, storms, racism, hatred, and violence. Infuse them with courage and hope for the struggle. We pray for those who have lost employment and desperately want to earn an income. Abide with those who have been evicted or fear that fate. Enter into the layers of human suffering in our land with your healing touch.

We give thanks for all who labor on behalf of the common good: health professionals, first responders, farmers, farm workers, grocery clerks, teachers, truck drivers, mail carriers. Move us toward cooperation that halts the spread of the coronavirus.

Shape us, O God, into the likeness of Christ. Grant us the courage to examine ourselves and surrender to your formative influence in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Arthritis of the Spirit," *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 9.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, www.salon.com, December 2, 2014, retrieved Sept. 1, 2020.