

Matthew 18:21-22

How do you Forgive?

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This month our worship theme is forgiveness. Two weeks ago I preached a sermon about the Prodigal Son and how he learned to forgive himself for being a pretty big jerk. His ability to forgive himself was established long before he made his biggest mistakes. From the time he was a little boy his father taught him that he was valuable; so when he made a mess of his life he had the foundation of self-esteem to forgive himself. We started there because the ability to forgive and be forgiven depends on a sturdy sense of self-esteem. Last week Heike preached a sermon on the elder son in the story of the Prodigal Son. He was the one who did everything right and never ran away, but he was jealous of his father's forgiveness for the Prodigal Son. So he had work to do to forgive him. His refusal to forgive suddenly became his own problem. Today we examine Jesus' conversation with Peter about how often you need to forgive. Peter asked Jesus to explain the rules and expectations around forgiveness. How often do we have to forgive? How easily should we let things go?

Forgiveness is a topic that we all wrestle with every day. Someone cuts you off at a rotary and you decide whether to get angry or let it roll off your back. Someone undermines you in a meeting and you have to determine whether to hold a grudge or try to work like a team. It is hard to know how to hold people accountable without being petty; that is a hard calculation. Kids bully each other online now, and you may not even know about it until it has been going on for a while. But when you see your son or daughter is upset, you may get so angry you have trouble forgiving the children who have been your children's friends, because it can be hard to manage your own feelings when you see your child is hurt. One translation this passage suggests that Peter was asking about how to forgive his brother;

another translation indicated Peter was asking about a church member. Family members or friends who become like family in a church setting can test your patience to the point, so you wonder how to forgive them. The hardest people to forgive are the ones you thought you could trust. These questions may take new forms with the internet, but basically they are the same issues that the disciples were discussing hundreds and hundreds of years ago, here in Matthew's gospel.

Let's take a closer look at what Jesus is saying, and see what we can learn for our lives today.

In the first place you cannot forgive people in an atmosphere of shame and blame.

When someone hurts you, the first way to deal with your pain is to defend yourself. That is natural. When you are injured – and let no one think that someone's hard words, emotional manipulation, or rejection don't hurt- is seek support from your friends and allies. Then you seek to defend yourself. You justify what you have done and substantiate your innocence, and start to blame the one who hurt you. Strangely, it is odd how ineffective that approach can be. You may find some comfort, or a sense of self-righteousness; but being RIGHT is not all it is cracked up to be.

In an office where people are always finding fault or assigning blame, folks quickly learn to cover their tracks. They figure out how to hurt one another without leaving any fingerprints on the job. The atmosphere changes to one of caution, fear and criticism. No one feels very safe, really. People justify everything. Few take risks, and that stifles all creativity. Business articles online are very critical of shame and blame, because it is bad for business. Now all the talk in offices is about team building. The most profitable businesses recognize that a lot of energy was wasted when competition got nasty, and people grew defensive, and forgiveness was rare.

We should not be surprised that it has been a growth process to learn to forgive, and to learn to work together. God had to learn the art of forgiveness too. We see how hard that was in the first book

of the Bible. When God created human beings God had high expectations that they would do as they were told. That proved to be naïve right from the start. God watched in dismay as the people God made turned from God. Shaming Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden made them wiser, but still they wandered. Adam and Eve had two children and one killed the other. God watched in shock and horror. By the time of Noah, God had decided that all of the people had gone astray and so God was determined that there would be consequences and retribution. The story of Noah starts thus:

*“The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was completely evil. The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth and God was heartbroken. So the Lord said’ I will wipe off the earth the human beings that I have created.”*

Noah built the ark and collected all the animals and took his small family into the ship for forty days. When the floodwaters had subsided, Noah built an offering to the Lord and made burnt offerings of some of the large animals. The Lord smelled the pleasing scent and thought, *“I will not curse the fertile land anymore because of the human beings since the ideas of the human mind are evil from their youth. I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done. As long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest, cold and hot, summer and autumn, day and night will not cease”*. {Common English Bible}

Nothing had changed really, from the first moment of creation, but everything had changed for God. Suddenly God grew wiser and realized that shame and blame do not work. People would still have evil thoughts; God could never change that, but God could change the reaction to evil. Instead of destroying the people, God decided to work with the people, through thick and thin. Whatever came, God would be in the game with the people. The rainbow became a symbol of God’s transformation. It is a symbol of the fact that nothing has ever been perfect. No one is ever really right all the time. There will be confusion and betrayal, and evil. But we can decide how to deal with it, banish it and pretend that the world is black and white, or deal with it and learn to forgive and rebuild. We can seek

vengeance or learn to forgive again and re-build, forgive and let go, forgive over and over and over again. In our day this rainbow that is associated with inclusiveness for all people, reminds us that deep in the past, God set a course to include all of us, no matter what. So that rainbow helps us remember that no one is perfect, and none of us are the same, and God can work with that. So we can too. The rainbow is the antithesis to the shame and blame mentality. It is impossible to forgive one another if you seek to be right or self-righteous.

Secondly, forgiveness is different from letting things go. You cannot forgive people who do not repent. The Prodigal Son was forgiven because he had seen his mistakes and come home. His father did not chase after him to offer him clemency; he waited for his son to repent.

There is a big difference from letting go of your anger so that it no longer eats away at you and true forgiveness. A lot of the psychological benefits of forgiveness come from letting go of the raw resentment that we feel when we have been wronged. But the Bible does not tell you to forgive people who have not repented. This gets very confusing. People point to the story of Jesus on the cross saying “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” But the Greek word translated as forgive in this passage in Luke really means God let go of this. Don’t hold this against the people. Jesus excuses the behavior of the people who crucified him, but that is different from forgiveness. {This distinction comes from an article in Christian Century. “After Injustice: What Makes Forgiveness Possible” by Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Christian Century* November 13, 2013. P, 28.} Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus tell his disciples to forgive unrepentant wrongdoers. We are to love our enemies, but not always forgive them. When someone repents then and only then can we be ready or expected to forgive them, but then we need to do it wholeheartedly, 490 times if necessary.

If we forgive people even when they do not know how much they have hurt us, or seem completely oblivious to their actions, then we patronize them. We excuse them. We comfort ourselves

with some moral superiority. We do not treat them as fully equal. We excuse their behavior, and belittle them; by excusing it, we also insult them, and assume they will never measure up, or are not capable of holding the full measure of our disappointment. To excuse people is to fail to take seriously what they have done. It demeans your own pain and it insults the person we have excused. It never moves anybody toward genuine forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness is a lifestyle. When Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone in the church Peter expects that he will impress Jesus. He is telling Jesus that he is prepared to forgive people seven times. When Jesus tells him to forgive seventy times seven, that is such a lot of forgiveness that you would be hard pressed to keep a tally because you would lose count. I don't think that Jesus is telling Peter to keep a ledger; no he is telling him to make a habit of forgiveness so that it comes naturally.

One of the most famous examples of forgiveness in modern times took place in Pennsylvania in 2006 at a school called Nickels Mine, a one-room elementary school in Amish country. One October morning a dairy farmer in the area entered the one-room school house and killed 5 girls and wounded 11 others before he shot himself. It was a horrific massacre in a quiet farm community full of people of faith. But the most remarkable thing about the Amish reaction to the mass shooting was that the men and women of this community forgave this man. Before the day was over they sent a delegation with food and condolences to his wife's home.

Theologians and psychologists will be studying this stunning moment in human history for a long time. Reporters who had grown jaded, were dumbstruck, and wondered aloud how any community could be so forgiving. The Amish were somewhat incredulous, as they explained that they lived in such close communities that they had to learn from the time they were children that you have to forgive one another. No one has the luxury of bearing a grudge, or holding on to hatred among the Amish. They

practiced forgiveness so often among their own people that it was part of their lifestyle as much as their beards and long dresses. They put on compassion each day, so they knew how to let go of resentment before it built up. They knew how to foster forgiveness before anger grew dark and festered in their souls. They lost track of all the times they had forgiven people. Four hundred or seven hundred, no one kept score because it did not matter. It was what they did.

How did the Amish learn to forgive so often? They learned by remembering that they were not perfect themselves. They humbled themselves and knew that Jesus' words for Peter were meant for them, too.