

Psalms 119:9-16, Matthew 18:15-22

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Dr. Elizabeth T. Boatwright

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The Math of Grace

Forgiving another person is hard work.

Psychologist Ron Nydam notes that introducing forgiveness into our churches is crucial to spiritual health. And why? Because 90% of his patients had someone in their life they needed to forgive.

Holding on to bitterness about past hurts will compromise intimacy. This behavior is unhealthy in a security setting but even more detrimental to a Christian community. A church full of irritable, anxious, depressed and bitter people is a broken community. From a spiritual and therapeutic perspective, forgiveness is important for personal well-being, salvation, reconciliation with our members, and restoration of fellowship with other believers.

It's also impossible to be bitter for very long without affecting our bodies. Medical professionals are beginning to see some kind of link between the ways our bodies function and the way we think. Bitterness, anger, and other negative emotions have been associated with glandular problems, high blood pressure, cardiac disorders, ulcers and a host of other physical ailments.

So, it would seem to be a good lesson for all of us to work on forgiveness to take back our health, relieve some of the stress in our lives, and learn to be a church that cares for one another. Christ offers a valuable lesson in forgiveness to his disciples, modeling what God did for us in forgiving us first.

So, this story of Peter and learning about conflict and forgiveness is vital to our health. Christ is laying out a simple outline of dealing with disagreements and strife.

Step one: Go to the person and see if you can talk it out, process what you know and what they know. This avoids spreading the concern beyond the two in the room. If the person does push back, denies the allegation or gets angry and fights back, Jesus says go to step two. Get one or two others as witnesses and work through the issue again with each side presenting and the witnesses able to confirm what they heard.

If that fails to resolve the issue, you take it up with the church, the larger body of people who know the parties and can offer an even wider perspective. But if that

fails, it's time to part and treat them as an outsider as they cannot be reconciled and refuse to be accountable.

This might seem a little harsh, but reconciliation, forgiveness and compromise are often cornerstones of a healthy church. If one person has sinned against another, it's important to have short accounts, and talk it out before it becomes a firestorm and damages the greater community. And then when two or three can agree on something under prayer and discernment, Christ will not abandon us, he will be actively involved. He wants to give us the desires of our heart.

But then Peter, ever the inquisitive disciple, wants to know, what if they sin against me? How many times should I forgive? Seven times? And Jesus answers, no Peter not seven, but 77.

Christ is delivering a decisive message here. In the ancient world the number seven was one of completeness and perfection. In this passage Christ is saying forgiveness is given in infinite times the number of completeness: 77.

As Buzz Lightyear would say, "To infinity and beyond." We cannot forgive enough. And that goes for those who have parted company with us as well.

So, when I read this passage, Jesus is not only offering some lessons in conflict resolution, but three ways to mold a forgiving heart.

The first is to remember God's model of forgiveness in the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. It is a lifelong debt, and one we can never repay. I suppose one way to think of it is to attempt to write down all the sins and bad mouthing and poor judgment calls and destructive criticism we've done in our lifetime past and present. Then try to project into the future and write those we think we'll commit.

Take a good long look at the list, spend a day of Sabbath and read them aloud or share them with someone you trust. And then tear it up, burn it, shred it, so that nothing is readable or retrievable.

That is God's love for us. Whatever unforgiving acts and poor calls we've made in this lifetime are erased, as it says in Psalm 103, "as far as the east is from the west." Only God knows the list and it's forgiven. That's what he did when His own son was sacrificed on the cross.

So how is it that we believe that we are above God? That we refuse to forgive our brothers or sisters or condemn them in our judgment? Isn't that God's job? But some of us refuse to pay attention to this enormous sacrifice and remain in our

sackcloth and ashes, with shrouds over our heads. We assume we can't forgive ourselves, or refuse to forgive another and go after the other party when we feel the power and want revenge. That's the story that follows this one. And so with an unforgiving attitude, we allow the root of bitterness to take hold.

So, our second job is to mold our heart of forgiveness by destroying the root. I don't know about you, but I'm digging out a lot of weeds in my garden after the rains. The recent downpours and seedlings of weeds not attended to have made my garden a virtual latticework of nasty green gargoyles.

So, when I need to work off some steam, or have a writing block, I go out to attack "the dark side," the weeds. Armed with my trusty weed puller, garden glove and an attitude of un-gratitude, I am a stealth hunter of those green fools that dare to hide in my herbs, roses, hydrangeas and irises!

There are those weeds with shallow root systems and I can pack them away at alarming speed, assuming the role of the master pruner! But then there are those enormous large prickly things that hide under the plants with roots that sink deep into the ground. It takes a virtual bulldozer to remove them. Cutting off the tops doesn't solve it, as the root will grow back with vengeance.

Instead I have to dig deep down and remove the whole plant, carefully, not allowing any of the loose seeds or parts of the plant to re-root. And so it is with bitterness. Bitterness often lies beneath our inability to forgive and be forgiven and can show up in amazing ways- anger, passion, slander, malice. It is a corrosive culprit that denies our peace and destroys our relationships.

The book of Hebrews tells us that "see to it no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it, many be defiled. We cannot hide our bitterness from God or from our own bodies. And it's always destructive – in fact the word in Greek *miaino* means to stain or dye.

The bitterness we nourish will stain our relationships. It doesn't make any difference what people have done to us or how bad it was or how often they did it. Bitterness as a response to wrongdoing is never acceptable before God. We can pretend to forgive someone, saving face, cutting off the external edge that shows, feeling we can justify our anger or inappropriate behavior.

But what remains is the real hurt, and resentment. **T**hat will not go away until we forgive with our whole heart and bear restoration and reconciliation to that person. Until we dig the whole root of bitterness out, the root wins.

Some years ago, I traveled to Rwanda after the destructive genocide that occurred in 1994 between the Tutsi and Hutu cultures. Over 1 million people died in the conflict, many while gathered in churches and schools. Once the dreaded war was over, the “gacaca trials” began.

These were a unique way of reconciling the two cultures back together with judgment from the local authorities. If a person was found, they went to trial and were convicted of murder. But instead of spending their life in jail, they were sent back to the community where the crime was committed. The local community was to accept them and with their labor, forgive them as they gave back to those they had harmed.

This was a unique way of reconciliation. Forgiveness, retribution and restoration. They could have easily kept all these people in jail for their lifetime, but the country needed healing and not retaliation. They needed to rebuild and not tear down. And so these mediation courtrooms were a way to heal a nation. There was no room for bitterness.

Bitterness can eat away at our emotional flower beds, threaten the life around us and take up a lot of space in our spiritual garden. Space that could be saved for things of beauty and growth are fighting for their lives. We can hide it with bark mulch and even try to kill it with some forbidden chemical, but until we've dug deep, it will always be there. In essence, not forgiving a person holds us in this same bondage and uncertainty. We spend too much energy to have to explain our anger and resentment, boring our friends with stories of revenge and lost sleep. We could be free by simply forgiving them.

Which brings us to our final point of molding a forgiving heart, forgiving those who have sinned against us, the question Peter asks. Perhaps one of the first things we need to do is point out what forgiveness isn't. It's not justifying, understanding or explaining why the person acted toward you as they did. It's not forgetting about the offense and trusting time to take care of it. It's not about asking God to forgive the person who hurt you, or be forgiven for being angry or resentful against the offender, or denying that you were really hurt; after all there are those who suffered more.

Clinical Psychologist Chanequa Walker-Barnes defines forgiveness as an internal process that is directed outwardly. It's directed toward another person and it is the process of letting go of the hostility that we have toward a person that we perceive as having wronged us. Forgiveness then, involves three elements: injury, a debt resulting from the injury, and a cancellation of the debt.

Most who suffer from an unforgiving spirit do not know that unforgiveness is the root of the problem. All they know is that they can't stand to be around certain people, or lose their temper over minor things and struggle with guilt over sins of the past. They begin to withhold from those they feel have wronged them, and begin to hold them hostage in their hearts, planning retaliation. An unforgiving spirit prevents us from being able to walk consistently in the Spirit.

When we withhold the fruit of the spirit, things like patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, the individual is held hostage in our mind and we become the ultimate loser. Katy Shevel tells us forgiveness is as challenging to ask for as it is to accept. It's a heartache, and may draw us closer to the original wound.

When we hold on to hurt, it's as if we are holding on to a rattlesnake by the tail, we will be bitten, or worse, take on the characteristics of our offender. So we need to model after our creator, who forgives with agape love, the seventy-seven times unconditional, undeserved grace filled affection that only God can provide.

So, the challenge today is to learn steps to forgive others. Please note I said forgive them. To trust them again, takes much more time and may never be regained, especially in open-ended situations of abuse, and criminal acts and threats. But to forgive them frees up your heart and allows you an opportunity to model after what God has already done for us.

A recent book entitled *The Gift of Forgiveness* offers a few suggestions.

First, and this is probably a relief, it is often unwise to forgive face to face. It may make the person feel as though they are put down. Select a time and place where you can be alone for a time, then pray and ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind all the people you need to forgive and the events you need to forgive them for.

Take time to listen to God's voice. Take two chairs facing each other and sit in one of them, disclosing everything you can remember about that person has done to hurt you. Choose by any act of your will to forgive that person once and for all time. You may not feel like forgiving, but do it anyway, and the feelings will follow.

Release that person from the debt you feel is owed you for the offense, by saying "You are free and forgiven."

If the person is still a part of your life, now is a good time to accept the individual without wanting to change aspects of their personality or behavior. You might even thank the Lord for using each person as a tool in your life to deepen your insight into His grace. This allows you to be more like the image of Christ.

Then pray a simple prayer, "because I am forgiven and accepted by Christ, I can now forgive and accept you unconditionally in Christ. I choose to forgive you. I release you from these hurts and you are no longer accountable to me for them. You are free." By demonstrating our forgiveness, our heart is set free as well.

A professor of Islamic Studies at Fuller Seminary tells of the amazing story of being asked to speak before a group of educators and Muslim dignitaries in Afghanistan on the subject of the relationship of Eastern and Western religion. But instead of offering the usual humor and factual recounting of the great pillars of the faith, he began his talk with an apology and asked forgiveness.

He apologized for the horrendous error of the Crusades and the destructive behavior of those who thought they were doing the right thing for the cause of faith. He articulated the sadness over the generations of resentment and bitterness that so many must have felt when we insisted an entire culture would be forced to believe as we did and were killed in the process.

That hall grew silent; then tears began to flow. Men stood up and were openly moved to speak and say thank you. The speaker had been a member of the community and pastor in the local church, and his words, perhaps for the first time in 800 years, offered a way to open hearts and articulate their gratitude for someone so transparent; the first installment on a debt that had never been repaid.

This is the math of grace. The seventy-seven times of forgiveness that God modeled for us with his son Jesus Christ. The attitude of humility, to live our lives as it says in Ephesians, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another just as in Christ, God forgave you."

The challenge today is to carry this out. To begin to rid ourselves of the grudges that we hold against our friends, to rejoice over the debts that have been forgiven, to forgive ourselves of our past failures and things we cannot change, to be compassionate and give back life and power to free ourselves and others of bondage we cannot see. That's forgiveness.

Peter will struggle with this later as he betrays Christ, for he cannot forgive himself, but Christ does. Consider that today as you go back to your homes, your offices, your relationships and friends. You may have the power to change history.