

I'd like to hear a sermon about: Forgiveness  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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Matthew 18:15-22

<sup>15</sup> “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Matthew 26:26-30

<sup>26</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” <sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

<sup>30</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

A few years ago, Mike Birbiglia (a writer and frequent contributor to Public Radio’s “This American Life”), was in a car accident while he was out of town visiting a friend. He was driving his rental car back to the hotel when was hit, t-boned, by a drunk driver.

A drunk driver who left the scene but didn’t get far- he crashed again less than two blocks later, was taken to the hospital and then arrested.

Birbiglia, thankfully, suffered only minor injuries. He thought that was the end of it.

But, due to a clerical error in the police report the car rental company told Birbiglia a few weeks later that he was responsible for paying the \$12,000 repair cost for the other driver’s car. The drunk driver’s car.

Mike was not going to let this fault committed against him go un-addressed.

But the problem wasn’t easy to fix. The paperwork had been filed, and despite countless phone calls and explanations, Birbiglia couldn’t find anyone willing to make the correction.

And because he wasn’t looking to make money from or spend money on a lawsuit, he couldn’t find a lawyer to take his case.

So, Mike Birbiglia gets to work figuring out what to do, because he is right.

In his own words<sup>1</sup>: “So I’m up until 3:00 in the morning every night. It’s hard when you know that you’re right. And I start coming up with these illogical plans like, I’m going to quit my job and work on this full-time. I’m going to sue the LAPD. And I will track down the driver of the other car.

One night Jenny [my wife] and I are out to dinner and she’s talking, but I’m not listening because I’m writing down ideas I have about the case on my napkin.... a very carefully laid-out argument about my situation. [on a napkin].”

And she says, “Why don’t you do that in the morning?”

And I say, “This is serious. Which part of this napkin don’t you understand?”

She says, “I don’t know what to tell you Mike because you’re right, but it’s only hurting you. And I’m just so glad that you’re alive, and I think that we should focus on that.”

She only has to say it once, and I dropped the case and I pay for the guy’s car, [I had to] give up on the idea of being right.”

Mike Birbiglia needed to forgive. Not because the drunk driver had earned it. Not because the police or the rental agency deserved it, but because he had to let it go. It was a burden he decided not to carry anymore.

As writer Anne Lamotte has said “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die,” and Mike didn’t want to drink rat poison any more.

Sometimes, forgiveness has **nothing** to do with the other person.

And sometimes, forgiveness is **all about** the other person, figuring out how forgiveness is linked to making amends.

Earlier this year, Cris Beam<sup>2</sup> flew out to Wisconsin to apologize to her ex-wife and to ask for forgiveness. More than ten years earlier as her wife was finishing up cancer treatments, Cris had been unfaithful. It broke up their marriage and it created a mountain of hurt and betrayal. Cris knew she owed it to her ex-wife to face up to that reality. Not because she could fix it, but because she wanted to be honest about where she had gone wrong, to genuinely apologize.

It took a while for them to find time to talk. Her ex had moved on, re-married, had children, was busy. Part of the apology was realizing that her ex was now happy. Doing well.

Cris wrote, “I explained that my purpose was to create a space for her to say whatever she needed to say to me so that I could hear her and apologize without defense or excuse. I offered this.... because, in my own experiences of being aggrieved, it’s what I most wanted.

[My ex] was generous, saying it meant a lot to her that I had come. I was expecting anger, but what she felt, she said, was a deep sadness. She, too, had known that our relationship, in those 14 years, [was not healthy]. But she was sad, almost unthinkably sad, that I left her in the way that I did.

The instinct, of course, [in those moments] is to fill the space with language, but I wanted to take the time to bear the full weight of her telling.

“I’m so sorry,” I finally said, “for causing you such great sadness.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/379/return-to-the-scene-of-the-crime>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/opinion/sunday/apologizing-apologies.html>

We talked about ways to make amends; I had thought of everything from helping out with her kids to volunteering in cancer wards. But no, she said, the amends were here, in this process.

“I forgive you,” she said.

Forgiveness is this, too.

Owning up to our mistakes.

Changing our behaviors where we can.

Fixing what we can.

And where we can't, being honest that our choices have caused damage. Hurt.

These ways of forgiveness are front and center in the first passage we heard from Matthew this morning. If you didn't notice that, it's okay, because when I say front and center I mean more, to the side and in the context.

Because on the face of it, the advice in Matthew on how to deal with conflicts seems more like a judiciary process. More like steps created to generate right and wrong, winner and loser.

But if you consider how and why this passage was written, you see that it isn't, really, about adjudication of an issue, this passage together is how a community names and clings to the ties that bind, the bonds of faith.

Professor Eric Barreto writes<sup>3</sup>:

“the steps Jesus lays out here are not a mere blueprint so much as a statement of communal values and an acknowledgment of both the frailty as well as the utter necessity of communal discernment. Love requires that we address the inevitable conflicts that will arise among us... Unaddressed conflicts can render a community unable to function as God hopes”

What Matthew is writing about, this whole process of taking elders and airing grievances, is about how we **stay together** to be the Body of Christ, living out our faith in the world. How do we do that? We are to treat them like tax-collectors and Gentiles. And what does Jesus say to do with our enemies? To love them. To pray for them. What did Jesus do with tax-collectors and Gentiles? He ate with them. Spoke with them. Made them the heroes of his parables.

We continue to hear this message in the next verse. How do we stay together? We forgive. Immediately after this process of airing grievances is established, Peter asks Jesus how often forgiveness is required, using the same phrase that began the previous section, “if a church member sins against me...” And Jesus says, forgive. Forgive not once. Not twice, but seventy-seven times, which in biblical code is the equivalent number to a trillion-google-squared.<sup>4</sup>

Yes, the part about honesty is important, but the end result isn't expulsion or righteous celebration, it's forgiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2164](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2164)

<sup>4</sup> Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, "Matthew" by M. Eugene Boring, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pages 377-380.

It goes against just about everything the world teaches us.  
Because we live in a world where there are deeds, and there are consequences for those actions.

Where good deeds will lead to good outcomes, positive rewards.  
And bad deeds will lead to punishment, exile.

Forgiveness doesn't follow this model. It wipes the slate clean.

And it begins with God. God who has been forgiving since the beginning.

From creation and Adam and Eve.

To the faithlessness of Noah's time that led to the flood.

Jacob and Esau and the stolen inheritance to Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers.

The Israelites wandering in the wilderness who make a golden calf and their descendants who will ignore the prophets sent by God and demand to be ruled by a king.

To the people who will shout to crucify Jesus.

God keeps forgiving. God keeps showing up.

How does God do it?

Theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that it "is not easy for God either. God, so the tradition attests is, like **US**, inured to "deeds consequences...forgiveness, as we may imagine, requires nothing less than God's capacity to resituate God's own life outside the orbit of deeds-consequences."<sup>5</sup>

Amy McCullough writes, "While forgiveness does not shy away from truth or soften the need for a relational recalibration, forgiveness persists as an outrageous act. It possesses an extravagant quality. Forgiveness is risky. Jesus refused to set a limit on pardons. Jesus taught disciples to pray for their own forgiveness while affirming they would forgive others. To offer steadfast love and heartfelt compassion when anger is understandable and punishment is justified defies both logic and emotion. Forgiveness stretches both heart and head."<sup>6</sup>

It must be noted that in none of these scenarios are speaking to situations of abuse, situations of harm, whether physical or emotional. Someone may forgive their abuser, but that forgiveness would never ever be tied to allowed abuse to continue. Abuse, in the home or anywhere else, is counter to God's message, counter to God's intent. And if you are in one of these situations I hope that you will ask for help, and speak the truth of what is holy and valued- you.

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5 Brueggemann, Walter. 2015. "The Impossible Possibility of Forgiveness." *Journal For Preachers* 38, no. 4: 8-17. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 24, 2018).

6 McCullough, Amy P. 2015. "Preaching Forgiveness." *Journal For Preachers* 38, no. 4: 18-23. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 24, 2018).

But if you are in a situation where you need to forgive, or you want to be forgiven, now do you forgive?

I'd love to tell you the three steps towards forgiveness, but they don't exist.  
Or they might exist for someone but might not be the steps you need to use.

Sometimes forgiveness is dramatic, and sometimes it is bit by bit.  
And sometimes it is both.

In 2006 an Amish community in Pennsylvania was in the news for the way in which they forgave the gunman who murdered five of their children while they were in school. They publicly forgave him. Included his wife and child in the fund-raising efforts for the families. It was difficult to imagine how a parent in that situation could offer such forgiveness. The truth was that they did offer that forgiveness, and mean it, because it is what faithful people do. But the rest of the story is that the forgiveness wasn't just a one-time choice, it was a choice they continued and continue to make as they continue to grieve and heal, even more than a decade later.<sup>7</sup>

A prayer you offer each and every day.

To forgive  
The person who betrayed you.  
Your parents who were flawed, recognizing that they did the best that they could.  
The classmate who has treated you cruelly.  
The one who flung cruel words, intended to hurt  
The friend who didn't keep your confidence.

Or to do the work making your worthy of forgiveness from the person you betrayed,  
the child you parented imperfectly,  
the classmate you were cruel to  
the one to whom you flung cruel words  
the friend whose confidence you didn't keep.

And in that process, to recognize, that forgiveness isn't just about other people,  
it's about you, too.  
And not just in the ways you seek forgiveness from others,  
the forgiveness God offers you.

You.

Because time after time, what I witness is that the forgiveness that is the hardest to receive is the forgiveness of our own selves.

Why is that?

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14900930>

Is it because we prefer to compare our insides with other people's outsides, where we always come up short?

Is it because accepting forgiveness means, in words shared by many preachers across the years, letting go of all hopes for a better past, the past we wish we had?

Isn't it time for all of us to do the work, and most of us have at least some of it do to, of making peace with our pasts so that we can build a more faithful future?

That's exactly what forgiveness helps us do. Our own forgiveness and God's forgiveness.

A few years ago, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South African wrote: "When I develop a mindset of forgiveness, rather than a mindset of grievance, I don't just forgive a particular act; I become a more forgiving person. With a grievance mindset, I look at the world and see what is wrong. When I have a forgiveness mindset, I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude."<sup>8</sup>

How do you think our current culture lives? Grievance or gratitude?  
And how might the world be different if gratitude took the day.

We can take comfort in the fact that we are not the first to wrestle with this, nor will we be the last. This we know because of what Jesus told us, when he gathered with his disciples for the last supper and imparted to them words he asked them to repeat each time they gathered at the table- if they'd asked him how many times they needed to do this I suspect he would have told them the same number he gave them for forgiving- seventy-seven, or a trillion google. Because we still need to hear them, and we still need live them and we still need to teach them.

"Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, '...this... is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Leonard Cohen famously sings<sup>9</sup> that "there is a crack, a crack in everything....  
That's how the light gets in."

The cracks in our own lives, let's not hide from them, let us use them to let God's light of forgiveness in, because that's what makes us beautiful, holy and real.

The message of forgiveness reminds us, that not only are the cracks the way that God's light get in, it's also the way we let God's light out.

Thanks be to God.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 218.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDTph7mer3I>