

BE THE CHURCH: FORGIVE OFTEN

Matthew 18:21-35

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I'm so glad that we have Peter in the Bible. If and when we ever think we're not good enough to be a follower of Jesus, Peter comes stumbling along to remind us that Jesus' first followers were far, far from perfect. Peter, James and John were the closest disciples to Jesus, but they so often didn't grasp what he was about. Jesus begs them to stay awake with him the night before the crucifixion, in the Garden of Gethsemane, but they fall asleep. The next day, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. He's often saying the wrong thing, making mistakes, asking silly questions, questions that show that he just hasn't been paying attention to the things that are important to Jesus.

In our passage for today, Peter asks, "How many times, Jesus, do we need to forgive one another? Seven times would be enough, wouldn't it?" Peter's mind works the way our minds often work. Give us a plan, a formula, an agreement to follow, something that will make life less complicated and our decisions less complex. Show us who we have to love, how many people we have to forgive, and we'll try our best.

But Jesus isn't interested in anything resembling the letter of the law. Jesus calls us to a life that is guided by principles that become matters of the heart.

Which commandment is the greatest? It was a trick question, but Jesus answered it in a way that sets the bar as high as it could possibly go. "Love." That's the answer. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus' reply would seem to answer every possible question, but someone even came up with a follow-up question to that. "OK, Jesus, but who is my neighbor?" In other words, who do we have to love? And who are we allowed

to keep outside our sphere of love? And Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor is the person who loves. It's not a matter of excluding; there simply is no one outside the circle of love, for God is love. Some people may choose to step outside that circle, but God continues to open the circle more widely.

Every time we humans try to put limits on God's love, God breaks the circle open again.

"How forgiving do we have to be?" We understand Peter's mindset. Jesus answers with a story. Like most of his parables, it's not one to be taken literally. It's full of exaggeration; it's meant to cause us to think. The story goes this way.

Imagine that you owe your employer the sum of \$100,000. You have borrowed from him for years, and never paid anything back. The debt is now enormous and he wants you to start paying it back. You look at what you make in a year, and how little you have left over at the end of each month, and you think, "I'm going to be in debt to this guy my whole life! I'll never experience any sort of freedom. This debt is going to be like a heavy weight I have to carry around forever." It's discouraging. Depressing. In desperation, you go to the man's office, you ask to see him and you beg, "Please, is there some way you can reduce my debt? Please, I just want the chance to live a normal life!" To your great amazement, your boss takes pity on you and says, "Just go. I'm forgiving your debt."

On your way home, you stop for gas, and you run into a coworker who you remember borrowed \$10 from you for lunch the other day. In front of his wife and kids, you yell at him, "Hey, when are you going to give me back my ten bucks?"

The boss hears how rudely you behaved to your fellow coworker, immediately draws up paperwork that will reinstate your debt, and fires you on the spot.

Forgiving others isn't something we do because we have to or because we're forced to. We forgive because we are so grateful that we have been forgiven. We forgive because we are so grateful that we are being forgiven.

Forgiveness starts with humility and honesty, with us being able to look at ourselves and realize how hopeless our own lives would be if the people we love did not forgive us. Think of the things you say when you're at your worst, when you're tired, when you're impatient. Think of the hurtful things you have done. The kindnesses you have neglected to do. If there are people who stick with you despite all that, you have been given the gift of forgiveness.

Now think about God, who knows EVERYTHING about you and still forgives you. God who knows your inmost thoughts, the things that (thankfully!) you have kept yourself from saying out loud. God doesn't keep count of your mistakes; there is no divine ledger book or report card. God's forgiveness comes without a price, but if you don't acknowledge it, you won't feel the freedom of it. If you don't recognize it, you won't appreciate it for the gift it is. If God's forgiveness doesn't cause you to be a forgiving person, you haven't truly experienced forgiveness as life-changing and transforming.

Here are a few quotes about forgiveness that were new to me as I read on this topic this week:

"Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." -Martin Luther King, Jr.

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you" -C.S. Lewis.

"Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed."

If you are still on the fence about forgiveness, perhaps, like Peter, wanting a little data, no less a reputable institution than the Mayo Clinic has reported on the health benefits of forgiveness. In a recently published study, researchers found that “forgiveness brings with it plenty of health benefits, including improved relationships, decreased anxiety and stress, lower blood pressure, a lowered risk of depression, and stronger immune and heart health. Letting go of negative emotions can often have a remarkable impact on the body.”

“A state of unforgiveness is like carrying a heavy burden — a burden that victims bring with them when they navigate the physical world,” the authors write. “Forgiveness can lighten this burden.”

As many of you know, Doug and I spent this week with family as we celebrated the life of our 27-year-old nephew who died of a heroin overdose. I learned a great deal this past week about my nephew, about all of the lives he touched as an AA sponsor, about the grip of addiction. I was made aware again of the importance of family. I also learned a new word, a Hebrew word, a word which Russell had tattooed on his arm when he began his journey into recovery. The word is “timshel”; you can find it in the book of Genesis, in the story of Cain and Abel. God is speaking to Cain, who is angry. Different versions of the Bible have slightly different words. In one version, God says to Cain, “You will conquer sin.” It’s spoken as a promise. In another version, God says to Cain, “You must conquer sin.” It’s spoken as a command. In a third version, God says to Cain, “You may choose to conquer sin.” This word “may choose” or as it’s put in the King James Version, “thou mayest” is the Hebrew word, “timshel.” It speaks to us of choice. We have choices in this life. Russell had “timshel” tattooed on his arm, in Hebrew, to remind himself every day that the way he lives is his choice. Conquering his demons was his choice.

Our nephew made the healthiest, most loving choices for six or seven years, living a life of sobriety, finishing college, marrying the woman of his dreams. 700 people came to the funeral home on Wednesday to pay tribute to his life, telling stories of the way he helped them. Several young people came up to his parents and said, "Russell saved my life." His was a life of kindness and generosity. In the end, he made one wrong choice. It cost him his life. At his funeral, my brother-in-law stood up and delivered an eloquent eulogy, telling the story of "timshel", saying to those in attendance, especially those struggling with addiction, "Don't let Russell's one bad last choice cause you to make bad choices."

God has given us free will, complete agency, the choice to live healthy, forgiving lives, or to hold onto resentment, anger, and grudges. In this new year, which choice will you make?

I want you to call to mind a person you have been struggling to forgive. Someone who is still in your life, or someone in your past. Perhaps the person you have been struggling to forgive is yourself. I'm setting my phone alarm for two minutes and I encourage you to engage in silent prayer. Ask God to help you find your way towards forgiveness, as you are grateful for God's forgiving grace in your life.