

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Forgiving Debts”

*Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12,
Matthew 18:21-35*

September 14, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 14, September 14, 2014, dedicated to Thalia Lewis on her 20th birthday, to Joyce Oyler, Rachael Gardner, Lauren S. Patris de Breuil and Skylar Steward our 2014/2015 Gladden Scholars, Christians every- where faced with how to forgive the intolerables and always to the glory of God!

“Forgiving Debts”

Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Have you ever found yourself listening to the words of Jesus and asking yourself: *“Why does this Mediterranean peasant of First Century origin continue to get under my skin?”* Or, *“Why should I bother listening to a 2,000-year-old healer when he tells me to forgive the unforgivable, love the unlovable, and look for hope in the hopeless? Who is this guy anyway?”*

If you find yourself “going there,” you are not alone. Many people either steer clear of passages that challenge their well-constructed line of thinking, gloss over the tough passages or leave the Christian faith altogether.

They simply “cop-out,” “opt-out” or “drop-out.”

Thomas Jefferson practiced all three in a rather “surgical” manner. A self-declared Deist (not a Christian as many modern day Christians want you to believe about this and other founding fathers), Jefferson took the passages of the New Testament he liked put them in one book and tossed out the rest. He called it the Jefferson Bible or *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Writing to John Adams (one of our guys - a Congregationalist with an open mind!), Mr. Jefferson explained the process of creating his bible: *“I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his (Jesus), and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an octavo of forty-six pages, of pure and unsophisticated doctrines.”*

Unlike Mr. Jefferson, as those baptized into this faith, we must wrestle with the texts lying on his editing floor. One of those texts Mr. Jefferson left out of his Bible was Matthew 18:21-35.

Our lesson today completes a whole section of Matthew's gospel on relationships within the Christian community. Peter wants to know how many times a follower of Jesus should forgive another person. Rabbinic tradition says three times. So, Peter, being a generous follower of Jesus suggests seven times. Jesus, being the Son of God, responds, seventy-seven (ancient texts translate "seven times seventy").

Whether 77 or 490, Jesus is trying to say, "***Forgiveness doesn't count the times.***" We are not keeping score when we forgive someone! Forgiveness is unlimited! In addition, Jesus is "fixing" Genesis 4:24 in which Lamech claimed revenge seventy-sevenfold. Once again, Jesus is righting a wrong.

The parable that follows is an exclamation point which underscores the fact that Christians are in a forgiven and forgiving community of faith. "*To lay claim to one without extending the other is to demonstrate an inability to live in and by the forgiveness of God.*" (F. Craddock in *Preaching Through the Church Year*, p.442).

In "the parable of the unforgiving servant," we meet a servant who has been forgiven a huge debt by the King – an amount equivalent to wages for 60 million workdays. This forgiveness of debt is inconceivable – but it happens! Leaving the presence of the king, the servant meets someone who owes him the amount of 100 days of labor. He sees to

it that the man is thrown in jail. When the King catches wind of this, he changes his mind – chastising and imprisoning the unjust servant until he can repay his debt – which will never happen. Jesus summarizes the parable with these words, “*My heavenly Father will do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart*” (Mt. 18:31).

In other words, you have to figure out forgiveness or your heart will be imprisoned forever! God will judge you for that...

While there are some problems with this parable that rattle around my head as a preacher, I want to lay them aside and get to the point of this text: **We have been forgiven much by God. So, we have to figure out how to forgive ourselves and others.**

Let’s face it: while we are capable of carrying around grudges for everyday screw-ups, we live in a world where intolerable things happen. These “intolerables” violate the laws of life and challenge us immensely in our efforts to forgive.

These “intolerables” include people we trust and love that hurt us in ways that leave us breathless and deeply wounded. Trusted friends and family members cheat on us or lie to us and create pain in our lives. We witness sex forced upon someone who doesn’t want it; innocents taken

into human trafficking, children and spouses who are abused; the poor are left out in the streets without help or hope. There are innocent people murdered in wars on our streets and wars across the globe (most notably the recent executions by ISIS in Iraq and Syria), children are killed in drive-by shootings or by drunk drivers; racial hatred and intolerance that makes us sick to our stomachs; violence against our sisters and brothers in the GLBT community humiliate and hurt people; and crimes against immigrants increase and we see people turn their eyes away with little interest because “they” are not “us.”

All of these are intolerable under all conditions, in all cultures at all times. Not one of these things become tolerable when some twisted people decide it is time to tolerate them. They would still be intolerable if everyone on the planet tolerated them.

Nevertheless, all these intolerables are forgivable – as hard as this might be to believe. Forgiving intolerable things does not make them tolerable. Forgiving starts out on the premise that some things are intolerable and no one should tolerate them. They are intolerable, not because no one has the stomach for them, but because they violate the laws of life. Forgiving intolerable things people do to us is the hardest threshold to cover when embracing forgiveness (drawn from Louis Smedes, *The Art of Forgiveness*, p. 151).

In his book, *The Art of Forgiveness*, Louis Smedes writes that we often hear people say of intolerable situations that something is “unforgivable.” But that isn't really true. What we may mean is: *“What you did to me is so intolerable that I may never be able to forgive you for it.”* But, the fact that you or I don't have the grace or wisdom to forgive something doesn't make it unforgivable any more than my inability to speak Portuguese makes Portuguese unspeakable. (Smedes, p. 152).

In time, we learn that forgiving and not tolerating have nothing in common. But, we never need to do so by accepting the intolerable act itself. Remember, intolerable things are forgivable. But, forgiving an intolerable wrong never makes it right.

Jesus never tolerated the intolerable, but he forgave everyone, always. With the woman caught in adultery and the men who violated her in Luke's Gospel, we remember that he did not condone her sin (or theirs), but neither did he condemn her (or them). Instead, he recognized the sins that had been committed. The Greek word for sin here is *hamartia*, which is an archer's term meaning, “missing the mark.” Instead of condemning the sinners, he told them - “don't miss the mark again.”

Perhaps I am wrong focusing on intolerable wrongs as we explore forgiveness of debts. But, I believe if forgiveness

of debts makes it into the Lord's Prayer, it significant enough to make it into the list of intolerables. Looking at worst case scenarios can be a bit extreme because no matter what we are facing within the situation of forgiving, we always face three stages of forgiveness.

First, we need to rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us. Second, we surrender our right to get even. Third, we revise our feelings toward the person we forgive (Ibid, pp. 5-6).

In facing forgiveness, both the greatest gift and the greatest curse we carry in life is our ability to remember. Smedes writes:

“It has been said, that 80% of what we see lies behind our eyes. If this is so, 80% of what we see when we look at a person who recently wronged us and deeply wounded us must lie behind our eyes in the memory of our pain. We filter the image of the villain who harmed us through the gauze of our wounded memories and in the process, we alter his reality. He shrinks in our minds eye to the size what ‘he did to us.’ He becomes the wrong he did. No longer is he a fragile creature living on the edge of extinction. He is no longer a confusing mixture of good and evil. He is . . . the sinner who did us wrong.” (Ibid., p. 6)

The journey of forgiveness begins when we see the other as human – filled with human frailties and pain, just as we are. I have often felt sadness or grief when faced with

forgiving someone who has wronged me. I look at them and see a person who is torn apart inside themselves by resentments, fear, mistrust, self-hatred and more. When I rediscover their humanity, I can begin the important work of forgiving their sin against me.

We need to surrender our right to get even.

Forgiveness means pouring the liquid fuel of vengeance into the earth not onto the flames of relationships. We often hang onto the toxic parts of our anger and resentments. They burn us up alive on the inside. We want our enemy to suffer as we have suffered. In the name of bringing justice to a situation, we hang onto old hurts.

That raises a question: "What is the difference between vengeance and justice?" Vengeance is our pleasure of seeing someone who hurt us getting it back and then some. Justice, on the other hand, is secured when someone pays a fair penalty for wronging another, even if the injured person takes no pleasure in the transaction. Vengeance is personal satisfaction. Justice is moral accounting." (Ibid, pp.7-8).

I can't tell you how many people I have seen in 29 ½ years of ministry who carry their hurts from life around everywhere with them. They inflict pain and suffering on others in their path because (in the words of the Apostle Paul) they have not worked out their own salvation. They

dump their pain at home, at work, at school, at church. They dump it in the check-out lines of supermarkets (which is why people should not carry handguns into such places) and while crossing lines on the highway through road rage. Now they dump it on-line – sometimes hurting those close to them in front of thousands of people they really don't know.

They have not surrendered their right to get even and they get even with the wrong people, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, for the wrong reasons. In this, we see the toxicity of unresolved issues that have not been surrendered to the powerful healing balm of forgiveness.

Once we have recovered our offender's humanity and given up our right to enjoy getting even, we begin to feel new feelings toward the one who has wronged us. When we see a person differently, we feel that person differently. We may have felt simple hate before, now we merely “wish that some good things might come the weasel's way.” (Ibid., p. 10)

After all, it is the best we can do! We begin, slowly and surely to move malice aside and give a weak and hesitant handshake of hope. We feel the benevolent stirs of a miracle inside of us. Forgiveness, in its embryonic stages, is beginning to find a place in our heart. There is so much more to say about forgiveness. Each of us has work to do

personally, in our family systems, in our culture and in our society when it comes to forgiveness.

All of us have work to do on forgiving ourselves.

Some of us need to work on forgiveness in the church and society. Having read Bishop Desmond Tutu's book on the "Truth and Reconciliation" proceedings in South Africa, I have become aware that we are in need of such a cleansing in the United States of America. We need to find ways to purge the toxic waste of racism and violence and hatred from our ecclesiastical and societal bloodstream. We need to find a way to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

The late Father Henri J. M. Nouwen writes in *Forgiveness: The Name of Love in a Wounded World*:

"I am struck by how I cling to my own wounded self. Why do I think so much about people who have offended or hurt me? Why do I allow them to have so much power over my feelings and emotions? Why can't I simply be grateful for the good they did and forget about their failures and mistakes? It seems that in order to find my place in life, I need to be angry, resentful or hurt. It even seems like these people gave me my identity by the ways in which they wounded me. Part of me is 'the wounded one.' It is hard to know who I am when I can no longer point my finger at someone who is the cause of my pain!"

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all of us love poorly. We do not even know what we are doing when we hurt others. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour – unceasingly. Forgiveness is the greatest work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.” (Quoted in *The Only Necessary Thing*, Nouwen, Crossroad Publishing, New York, N.Y., 1999, pp. 152-153).

Please embrace the stages of forgiveness in your own life. First, rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt you. Second, surrender your right to get even. Third, revise your feelings toward the person you forgive.

Begin the work with yourself, your family and your church family. As Henri Nouwen says, *"It is the greatest work of love (you will do) among the fellowship of the weak that is our human family."*

My favorite quote of all time on forgiveness comes in closing words of Lewis Smedes book *The Art of Forgiveness*:

Forgiving is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and cannot forget. Forgiving changes a bitter memory into a grateful memory, a cowardly memory into a courageous memory, an enslaved memory into a free memory. Forgiving restores a self-respect that someone killed. And, more than anything else, forgiving gives birth to hope for the

future after our past illusions have been shattered. When we forgive, we bring light where there was only darkness. We summon positives to replace negatives. We open the door to an unseen future that our painful past had shut. When we forgive, we take God's hand, walk through the door, and stroll into the possibilities that wait for us to make them real (p. 176). When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us . . . When we forgive we walk in stride with the forgiving God” (p.178).

And Peter asked Jesus, “How many times should I forgive? Seven?” Our Mediterranean peasant Savior, the Son of the Living God, answered, “Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, forgiveness never counts the times. Forgiveness just forgives.” Amen.

Copyright 2014, First Congregational Church, UCC