

# *“Forgive Often”*

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

*The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 19*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 17, 2017, 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 19, dedicated to the Confirmands of the class of 2018 as they begin their journey and to the blessed memory of Ruth Lowe Sitler, mother of Susan, grandmother of Luke, Daniel, Sarah, and Thalia, great-grandmother of Benton and Rylan and my mother-in-law for 32 years. Rest in the arms of Jesus, Ruth. And always dedicated to the glory of God!

*“Forgive Often”*

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

Lewis Smedes begins his book, Forgive and Forget, “Somebody hurt you. Maybe it was yesterday. Maybe a lifetime ago. And you cannot forget it. You did not deserve the hurt. It went deep enough to lodge in itself in your memory. And it keeps hurting you now” (Forgive and Forget, Healing the Wounds We Don’t Deserve, Lewis Smedes, 1984, Harper

Collins, NY, NY, p. xv). So, for you, the questions surrounding your story and forgiveness weigh heavily on your heart. You are not alone. Every one of us muddles through in world where even well-meaning people hurt each other.

When we invest ourselves in deep personal relationships, we open our souls to the wounds of another's disloyalty or even betrayal. Deep hurts we don't deserve flow from a dead past into our living present. And we are called by Jesus to forgive. Not just forgive but to forgive often.

Forgiveness is God's invention for coming to terms with a world in which – despite their best intentions, people are unfair and hurt each other and hurt each other deeply. God began by forgiving us. God invites us to forgive each other.

So, I begin today with a fable – “The Magic Eyes: A Little Fable” shared by Lewis Smedes in his book, Forgive and Forget.

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*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.*

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In the village of Faken in the innermost Freeland, there lived a long thin baker named Fouke, a righteous man with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. He was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him, so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

Fouke's wife Hilda was short and round. She round – all around. She never kept people at bay with righteousness. Her soft roundness seemed to invite people close to share the warm cheer of her open heart.

Although Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too as much as he allowed her to, her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness. And there, in her bed of need lay the seed of sadness.

One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger in his bedroom lying on Hilda's round bosom. Hilda's adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the Faken congregation. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should. In his heart of hearts, however,

Fouke could not forgive Hilda for bringing shame to his name.

Whenever he thought about her, his feelings toward her were angry and hard; he despised her as if she were a common street walking woman. When it came right down to it, he hated her for betraying him after he had been so good and so faithful a husband to her. He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy.

But Fouke's fakery did not sit well in heaven.

So, each time that Fouke would feel his secret hatred toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble, hardly the size of a shirt button, into Fouke's heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain like the pain he felt the moment he came on Hilda feeding her hungry heart from a stranger's expression of interest.

Thus, he hated her the more; his hate brought him pain and his pain made him hate. The pebbles multiplied. And Fouke's heart grew very heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt. There was one remedy, he said, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. **Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes.** He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a woman who needed him and as a wife who had sought to love him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday.

Fouke protested. "Nothing can change the past," he said. "Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change."

"Yes, poor hurting man, you are right," the angel said. "You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes."

"And how can I get your magic eyes?" pouted Fouke.

"Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart."

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and

to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So, he asked. And the angel gave.

Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke's eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a woman who needed him and who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him. The angel kept his promise; he lifted the pebbles from Fouke's heart, one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before. He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy.

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This is a fable. Only a fable. But, I hope this fable speaks to you.

It speaks of the stages of a hurting heart in search of healing. Such a heart moves from hurt, to hate, to healing and finally to coming together – which are the four stages of forgiveness. A heart that moves through these four seasons is a heart which will feel the pebbles, or the weight of hate, lifted and love return.

In his book, The Life of the Beloved, Fr. Henry Nouwen calls forgiveness “the name of love in a wounded world.” He asks, “Isn’t it true that people we love most and love us most are also the persons who hurt us most?” Think of parents, friends, spouses, children. Those who are closest to us cause us the deepest pain. Neither strangers far away, or enemies close by can cause as much hurt as those close to us. Strangers and enemies are ultimately outsiders and we do not give them access to our innermost being. No, our real anguish comes from those who love us but cannot love in us in the way that our heart desires. Our father, our mother, our sister, our brother, our spouse, our significant other, our closest friend, our nearby neighbor, our co-worker can all hurt us most and be hurt by us most of all. This is where we are most loved and wounded. This is where our greatest joy and greatest pain touch each other (Henri Nouwen, quoted in Weavings, “Forgiveness: The Name of Love in a Wounded World,” March/April 1992, p. 13).

Why do those who love us wound us so much? It is because they cannot fill our deep and often unconscious desire for complete communion. The first love, the love of the One who calls us the Beloved and offers us complete communion does not wound us. God’s love is unconditional – never limited by needs and unfilled desires. God’s love gives without strings

attached. God's love is real and peaceful. It is not contentious and conditional. But, in the face of limitless love we still, too often, cling to own wounded self, our wounded hearts. And we forget to forgive. Or we are belligerent in fighting forgiveness.

In fact, I am always amazed how I cling to my old wounded self. Why do I think so much about the people who have hurt or offended me? Why do I allow them so much power over my feelings and emotions? **How about you?**

Why can't you and I simply be grateful for the good they did (come on.... Admit it... they have done something good!) and then forget about their failures and mistakes? For some reason, in order to find our place in life, we need to be angry, resentful, and hurt. Those who have hurt us have almost given us the identity we carry around – “the wounded one.” Do you resemble this observation about un-forgiveness?

What if we found a way to allow God to take the pebbles from our heart? What if had Magic Eyes? What if we were able to go back in our memory, in our lives long before anyone accepted us or rejected us – to the place where the Beloved One, God in Jesus Christ, looked into our eyes with eyes of love – and simply loved us. What if the house we lived in, our true home, was the place of unconditional love from the One who was and is and shall always be Pure Love? Perhaps our pebbles would leave our hearts. Our wounds would disappear like snow in the sun. Forgiveness would be the spontaneous and even easiest response to pain and struggle.

I am not trying to wash away wounds – pretend like they aren't real or didn't happen. I am not suggesting in any way that your suffering is superficial or unimportant. But, I am aware that we have a presence in our lives of unconditional love and forgiveness that too easily gets forgotten when we cling to the memories of our wounds and suffering like they are God. And in fact, that presence, we call God, is seeking to be the presence of love in our lives.

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. And 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. We need magic eyes. We need to look at those who have hurt us,

who we have felt hate for, and we need to move to healing and come together. We need to change the names we call those who hurt us to one name – child of God.

Lewis Smedes writes in The Art of Forgiving, “*Forgiving is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and cannot forget. Forgiving changes a bitter 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 in light where there was 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*” (Lewis Smedes, The Art of Forgiving, Ballantine Books, New York, N.Y., 1996, p. 176).

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told this parable about forgiveness because he knew we really stink at this. It is rough and tough parable from beginning to end. Although he set it up as a story between a king and his slaves, it could as easily have been a story between Fouke and Hilda. It could have easily have been the story of Peter and his wife. It could have been a story between you and the one you can’t forgive and me and the one I can’t forgive. In this parable, the truth is that we must

forgive beyond belief – or our lack of belief and actions toward forgiveness will haunt us and torture us forever. We are called to always forgive and to do it often.

The bottom line is this: If we truly believe that Jesus is the revelation of what is going on inside of the eternal God, then we are forced to conclude that God is loving and forgiving. The God who can wipe us out, exhibits holy powerlessness by being loving, forgiving and merciful in all God's ways.

God has given you Magic Eyes if you choose to use them. Be forgiving as God is forgiving. Whatever you are hanging onto against whomever you are lording it over, let it go. Surrender your will to God. Forgive Often. Then in the bountiful mercy of God, move on. And in the end, you are left with Magic Eyes which will serve you for the rest of your life. Amen.

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