

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 14, 2008, Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Jerry Lee McLaughlin III on his baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“How Often Should I Forgive?”

***Exodus 14,19-31;
Matthew 18, 21-35***

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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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Have you ever found yourself listening to the words of Jesus and saying something like, “Why does this Mediterranean peasant of First Century origin continue to get under my skin?” Or, “Why should I listen 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 (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.”

Even after cutting and pasting, you and I still must wrestle with the text today lying on the editing floor. Matthew 18:21-35 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.

The parable that follows is an exclamation point that underscores the fact that the 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.” (Fred Craddock in *Preaching Through the Church Year*, p. 442)

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. So, let us not withhold forgiveness for the offenses that creep into our fellowship and into our lives!**

Let’s face it: while everyday screw-ups undo us, we live in a world where intolerable things happen. These intolerables violate the laws of life and challenge us immensely in our work to forgive.

These intolerables include people we trust and love hurt us in ways that leave us breathless and deeply wounded; trusted friends lie to us and create pain in our lives; sex forced upon someone who doesn’t want it; children and spouses who are abused; the poor are left out in the streets without help or hope; the poor of this nation or any nation are left on the streets and without help or hope.

Also, innocent people are murdered in wars on our streets and wars across the globe; 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, turning heads 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 intolerable things 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)

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, in Luke's Gospel, we remember that he did not condone her sin, but neither did he condemn her as a person. Instead, he recognized that she had sinned. The Greek word for sin here is *hamartia*, which is an archers term meaning, "missing the mark." Instead of condemning the woman, he told her "don't miss the mark again."

Perhaps I am wrong focusing on intolerable wrongs as we explore forgiveness. 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).

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 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. 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 23 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 and while crossing lines on the highway through road rage. 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 stirrings of a miracle inside of us. Forgiveness, in its embryonic stages, is beginning to find a place in our heart. A miracle of healing is beginning in our hearts. 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 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.

One of my teachers, 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."

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.