

*ON FORGIVENESS*  
by  
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Readings: Colossians 3:12-13  
Matthew 18:21-22

March 6, 2011 – Communion Sunday

**Colossians 3:12-15a**

<sup>12</sup>As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let peace rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

**Matthew 18:21-22**

<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.

A little boy who was having some trouble with a playmate heard this lesson in a Sunday School class and did a little computing. He did the math and found that 7 times 70 equals 490. So he told his playmate "Billy, I'll forgive you 490 times, but after that you better watch out."

Forgiveness stands at the center of Christian faith. It is the deep conviction that God DOES forgive us that empowers us to in our daily prayers, and in our weekly corporate worship, to pray for God to forgive us. The one prayer all Christians know includes the petition, "Forgive us our trespasses (make that sins) as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness by God and by others and even by ourselves is what we so desperately need to live in this world. We believe in forgiveness. We pray for forgiveness. *We simply find it ever so hard to forgive.*

Which is so very, very tragic. For the ABILITY to forgive is one of those grace-filled, mysterious, powerful keys to life and faith. While the INABILITY to forgive is one of the terrible curses of humankind.

In my experience, **PEOPLE WHO CANNOT FORGIVE** are a sad lot. The inability to forgive a loved one undercuts the relationship, gnawing at it until it breaks. The inability to forgive impoverishes what could be a rich friendship. The inability to forgive OTHERS twists ones personality. And the inability to forgive YOURSELF leads to disabling guilt and low self esteem.

The *inability* to forgive leads to death. But **THE ABILITY TO FORGIVE LEADS TO LIFE!** The forgiving person affirms life, affirms the brokenness and the wholeness of life, the strengths and shortcomings of himself and of others. The forgiving person affirms that new beginnings are always possible, even in the darkest disappointments. The forgiving person recognizes that neither he nor anyone else is perfect. The forgiving person knows that the real meaning of the great commandment to "**love your neighbor as yourself**" is to "*forgive your neighbor as you need your neighbor to forgive you.*"

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, author of the classic *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, writes of a social work study on the dynamics of forgiveness as a social process. The researcher told Kushner, "That among all the people she interviewed, there was a unanimous agreement on one point. When they forgave someone, when they let go of a grievance they had been carrying for some time, there was for every single one of them *a physical sense of relief, a feeling of having put down a burden.* They didn't realize they were carrying this load of bitterness until it was taken away from them, and suddenly they felt so much lighter and freer. They had, at some level, been enjoying the bittersweet moral posture of being the aggrieved victim and hadn't wanted to give it up, and now suddenly they discovered it felt a whole lot better not to be a victim anymore." (LA4/3)

Forgiveness is powerful, powerful stuff. Forgiving leads to life, wondrous, vibrant, abundant life.

As we enter the Lenten season, a time we set aside for introspection, it is a natural and appropriate thing to do to reflect on our need to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. And as we enter a new phase in our congregation's life, a new season, if you will, it is timely and most appropriate to seek deeper forgiveness and reconciliation one with another. We have come through a difficult period as a congregation. As the prayer says, we have committed our trespasses and others have trespassed against us. We have struggled and talked with one another, and now it is long past the time to make up and move on. Later this morning we will elect a pastor nominating committee and open the next chapter of this congregation's life. And to open a new chapter, we have to first close the last one.

We typically think of forgiveness either in terms of God's forgiveness of us for our sins, or the forgiveness one person extends to another after being harmed. In the gospel of Matthew, we learn that the need for forgiveness and reconciliation WITHIN the church has been with us from the very beginning of the Christian movement.

You might be surprised to learn that the word "church" occurs only four times in the gospels – all in the gospel of Matthew. It occurs once in the famous scene where Jesus declares that the faith of Peter is the rock on which he will build his church. And twice in the passage immediately preceding our text for today, where Jesus advises his followers on the process for how they are to seek reconciliation one with another in the community of faith. And the fourth time is in the text we just read, Peter's question about how many times we have to forgive another member of the church.

Note that Jesus and Peter are the principal conversation partners in each case. As the universally recognized spiritual founder of the church, as the living symbol of the church, Peter seeks the wisdom of Jesus on what the church needs to maintain a healthy and faithful community life.

"How many times do we have to forgive each other?" Peter asks. The Hebrew law of his day said SEVEN (which is five or six more times than most of us will forgive another). Jesus replies, "seventy seven times" or as some translations put it, 70 X 7.

Seventy times seven. What Jesus means, of course, is don't bother to count the number of times you forgive someone. There is no calibrating forgiveness, no satisfactory line is to be found along the path of calculating numbers of offenses. Each time you forgive someone, wipe the slate clean and begin again. Begin fresh. Totally clean, like nothing had happened.

Forgiveness as a personal practice leads to health and spiritual maturity. And so also, the practice of forgiveness within the Christian community contributes to the health and spiritual maturity of the living body of Christ which is his church.

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "To forgive somebody is to say one way or another, 'You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights, I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend.'" (*Wishful thinking*, 28-29)

In a sermon on this text given some 12 years ago, a colleague of mine spoke of forgiveness this way:  
"Without forgiveness there is no moving on. Without forgiveness we stay stuck. How many marriages end up in divorce, how many wars keep being fought, how many families and churches and friendships are wrecked, because of an inability or an unwillingness to forgive? My guess is there are some here this morning who are stuck at just that point. Short of forgiveness, there is no moving on. Nobody, least of all Jesus, ever said that forgiveness is easy. But it is essential. I doubt there is anyone here who, deep down, doesn't know as much."

You know, I think those words of former Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church pastor Gene Bay are as right now, as they were back then. (9/27/1998)

Friends:

It is God's mercy that leads us to be merciful.  
And it is God's grace that makes us gracious with our neighbors.

It is God's love that transforms hatred and distrust into love.  
And it is God's FORGIVENESS that empowers you to freely forgive yourself and your brothers and sisters.

Now, may the grace, peace, mercy, and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. AMEN.