

*"Forgiving From the Heart"*  
*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr*  
*First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Sept. 17, 2023*

*PLEASE READ:*  
*Romans 14.1-12*  
*Matthew 18:21-35*

Desmund Tutu, who grew up under apartheid in South Africa, insisted that “without forgiveness there is no future.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, forgiveness is perhaps the most important doctrine and practice at the heart of the Christian faith, essential not only for the formation but the maintenance of a free conscience and healthy relationships. But however central forgiveness is to our faith, many of us find it a hard concept to *believe*, let alone *practice* in our lives... The Greek word for forgiveness used in our text today is from the verb “apoluo” which is an equestrian term meaning to “unbridle” a horse. Horses like to be untied so they can run free in the fields. Forgiveness has at its root this deep sense of freedom, and it is God’s desire that we experience this freedom in our hearts, our relationships, and in our communities.

In our gospel text this morning, Jesus asks Peter how many times he must forgive. Peter replies, "Seven times seven." Peter, thinking he’s being generous, gives the number of times required by rabbinic law *plus four*. The law required only three times. Jesus tells him, however, that he must forgive "seventy-times-seven." At this point, Jesus’ original hearers would have audibly gasped at the outrageous suggestion that anyone should forgive so much. Jesus might as well have said that his followers are called to forgive in *an unconditional and unlimited* way. Yes.

Then Jesus tells the parables of the unforgiving servant, and we are confronted with the complexity and difficulty of forgiveness, and the consequences of judgment. And if you’re not uncomfortable with this teaching, then you probably didn’t understand what Jesus is saying here... He’s ambiguous. He uses the word debt, which is economics. It’s the same word we use in the Lord’s Prayer. It can also mean transgression or “trespass.” It’s a radical teaching with multiple layers of meaning.

Anyway, the King acts mercifully, forgiving the debt of the servant. The King forgives in a divine manner - unconditionally and freely. For God, forgiveness is easy. It is *not* so easy for us. The case of the two servants illustrates this. The servant who was forgiven by the king does not in turn forgive.

It is hard to forgive one another, to let go of what we feel we are owed. Too often, we prefer to seek so-called justice, or revenge. We prefer “cancel culture” which simply dismisses people. We want justice without compassion. The Romans passage sheds light on the fact that the church has always struggled with controversies over faith and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *Forgive* (New York: Viking, 2022), xiii.

And Paul's admonition is clear: "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Why do you despise your brother or sister?" These are strong questions, but worthy of our reflection. Jesus' parable reiterates what he said back in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged..."

Christ calls us to let go of judgment and be about the work of forgiving one another as God forgives us. Forgiveness is possible because of the Cross. On the Cross God took our judgment upon God's-self, allowing us to experience liberation from guilt and shame. As we receive God's forgiveness, we can extend forgiveness to others. Karl Barth says, "When the pardon of God is received it enables us to forgive." Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. To be devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

But how do we learn to live in the freedom of forgiveness? How do we learn to forgive from the deepest level of our consciousness, the heart? Let's consider 3 domains of forgiveness: the intra-personal, the relational, and the social.

**INTRA-PERSONAL:** Forgiveness is fundamentally an issue of the heart. Jesus says that we are to "forgive from your heart." We can only forgive someone if we have been transformed by the good news. It is forgiveness that makes God's healing and cleansing power real in our lives. We first need to realize how desperately *we* are in need of God's liberation and salvation. With John Newton, we need to confess, "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior!" As we admit our own debt and realize how God has paid it, God's Spirit can heal those places deep down where we have experienced judgment and condemnation. Christ frees us from our guilt and shame. Through Christ we believe God accepts and forgives us by grace; unconditionally.

Jeremiah states God's position: "For they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." In God's forgiveness, our past is forgotten.

One of my favorite stories is about a nun who went to the bishop and said she had seen Christ in a vision. The bishop required proof of her claim and said that proof would be if Christ could tell her the bishop's most recent sin. Several months later, the nun appeared before the bishop and said she had seen Christ again. She had asked Christ what sin had been most recently committed by the bishop. Nervously, the bishop asked, "What did Christ say?" The nun replied, "He said, 'I don't remember.'" The bishop had his proof that the nun had indeed seen Christ.

RELATIONAL: It's only if we first deal with our own sin and receive God's forgiveness that we can begin to forgive others. It's more complicated for us, though. As we pray every Sunday, we are to forgive others as we have been forgiven. But we aren't Jesus Christ, of course... Prayerful contemplation of the gospel is necessary in learning to forgive others mainly because it helps us to see that we are never in a position to judge. Some today argue that "forgiveness culture" helps abusers escape accountability, but forgiveness and justice don't have to be at odds. "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." Justice matters, but we are to trust the ultimate calculus of justice to God.

Forgiving those who hurt us is about freeing our hearts from anger. I love Frederick Buechner's description of anger. "To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways, it's a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

It takes courage to leave justice to God. It takes courage to let go, to reach out and say to someone, "I'm sorry, but you really hurt me," "Let's work through this and be a family again," or "Please, forgive me. Let's start over in our relationship."

In Jesus' parable of the King and the two servants, the first servant was forgiven by the King, but he did not accept the forgiveness. His heart remained untouched by the King's mercy. The King's forgiveness was used by the servant to get even with the other servant. You see, this parable is not so much a teaching about God's fickle forgiveness, but about how important it is to *fully receive forgiveness*, and how dangerous it can be if we do not! If we do not forgive, our relationships will be a nasty web of measured response, *quid pro quo* and revenge.

Here I want to make the important distinction that *forgiveness* does not always lead to *reconciliation*. To be reconciled with someone who has hurt you requires an acknowledgement of the hurt, and *mutual* repentance and forgiveness. It requires restorative justice, that both parties take responsibility for their sin and show remorse by taking action to make amends. One always has the power to forgive, but one does not always have the power to be reconciled... Forgiving from your heart allows for the possibility of reconciliation but does not ensure it.

SOCIAL: Which brings us, finally, to the social dimension of forgiveness... Our country is as divided as ever and many people are hurt and angry. When you think about the countless African Americans whose families have been crippled by generational and systemic racism (including slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and police brutality, etc.), or the LGBTQ folk who have faced systemic bigotry... or the increasing number of

those living below the poverty line because of systemic greed and the burden of debt. How do you even begin to talk about forgiveness without some public penance and restorative justice? Is forgiveness just a “deeply engrained religious hangover from Christianity?”<sup>2</sup> How do we share the good news of forgiveness with those who consider Christianity more a source of judgment and condemnation, or at best intellectually irrelevant and a thing of the past? At a social level, we wealthy Christians need first to ask forgiveness before we can give it.

Donald Miller wrote the book, *Blue Like Jazz*. Miller was a student at Reed College, in Portland Oregon. Reed College is an intellectual school, boasting one of the highest Rhodes’ Scholars per capita of any school in the United States. However, Reed College is not known for its openness to Christian faith. It’s right up there with my *alma mater* across the river, *Lewis and Clark College*, voted while I was there, *the most hostile campus to Christian faith*. Anyway, every year Reed College has the “Ren Fayre,” a weekend tradition of pretty depraved partying, drinking and general debauchery. The school actually brings in White Bird, a medical unit that specializes in bad drug trips. Don Miller and some of his Christian friends on campus decided that this was a pretty good time to come out of the closet, to let other students know there were a few Christians on campus. They brain-storming how to give a witness to Christ in this most pagan of all weekends. Then one guy, “Tony the beat poet” had an idea: Let’s build a confessional booth in the middle of the campus! Everybody kind of laughed, saying, Yeah, there will be a lot of sins to confess that weekend!

But then Tony said, “But here’s the catch... We are not actually going to accept confessions... We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness (and self-righteousness), we have misrepresented Jesus... We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them...”

Isn’t that amazing? I’ll let you read the book to see what happens, but let’s just say that it was a freeing experience... Brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, I hope some of this is helpful to you as you wrestle with forgiveness and the heart of the gospel. We are called to a deeper experience of freedom in our hearts, in our relationships, and in the society in which we live. As Jesus teaches, if you don’t forgive from the heart, the one who will suffer in the end is you.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. AMEN.*

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<sup>2</sup> Sabine Birdsong, “To Hell with Forgiveness Culture,” Medium (blog), June 5, 2018, <https://medium.com/@vvitvhplease/on-forgiveness-culture-bf805648b-43a> .