

Sermon: The UnEntangling Work of Forgiveness**Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 13, 2026**

Ah, forgiveness. We begin here. Another church year. Another school year. Another season as summer turns to fall and we begin with forgiveness. Why do you who have come to worship God this morning need to hear a word on forgiveness? It's likely very different for each one of us, some of us needing to forgive something long in our past, others of us wondering how to forgive something more current, or what it means to forgive when the other doesn't think they need forgiveness. Or when the other still has the power to wound us, how is forgiveness even wise? Or is it wondering if you can ever be forgiven for what you have done or not done or what you do with another's unforgiveness. But it's all of us, isn't it? All of us in the same boat for it is the nature of our fallible broken human lives that none of us are without the need to be forgiven and none of us are without the need to forgive.

In our spiritual tradition, Christianity, forgiveness sits always front and center. It begins and ends the story of it all. Eating of the fruit of the tree we were told not to eat of and later crucifying God who came among us in love. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Is what Jesus says from the cross. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" is the central petition in the prayer Jesus gave us to pray and that we pray each Sunday and many days in between.

One would imagine in the scripture that Deirdre read, Peter is worked up by something when he comes to Jesus with this question. Not only

because Peter is often worked up by something but because he comes to Jesus with this exasperated question - “Now, how many times must we forgive?” And he throws out the number 7. 7 times? Is that how many times? It’s a big number, not a random number but a big number - 7 times. That would be a lot of times to have to forgive someone. I mean, most of us have a hard time forgiving once, much less over and over again, 7 times. It’s a big number but not a random number. Peter’s suggestion of forgiving 7 times is a direct reversal, actually, of what is known as the seven-fold or “shibathayim” pronouncement in Genesis chapter 4 when God declares that if anyone kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on them seven-fold for that wrong done. And within that same chapter, a few verses and a generation later Lamech takes that number and multiplies it, bragging to his wives in a song how he killed a young man for bruising him, proudly proclaiming a blood vengeance of not seven times but seventy seven times that of Cain’s vengeance. I repaid him 77 times, ha! Sounds like the machismo of our Secretary of Defense these days.

So there’s this reversal or course correction going on in this encounter between Jesus and Peter where Peter knowing Jesus, asks if he should forgive 7 times- it’s probably a crazy number like 7 - and Jesus counters with not 7 times Peter but 70 times 7 or depending on the translation 77 times. Jesus insists that it’s always gotta be about forgiveness, never payback and he and Peter together are overturning a culture of retributive justice for a new day of restorative justice. “In the world I’m ushering in,” Jesus says, “it’s not going to be about about how much can we justify repaying someone for wrong done to us but how do we restore the relationship that has been broken. That is the question, always now, that is the movement of the new world, the Kingdom Come. Not how

much suffering can we exact against the one who made us suffer, but how do we restore the relationship?" This is not for the faint of heart. It's a harrowing spiritual requirement. Of course we distract ourselves by making the Christian faith about right behavior and sin and right belief. "Are you saved?"

"Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and savior?"

"I have so I'm all good!"

How about the question - "do you love and forgive like your Lord and savior loved and forgave and asked you to do as well?" How about that's the question? Hm?

It's not the question because the answer will always be a humiliating "No. No, I don't love and forgive like my Lord and Savior asks of me." Oops. Cause it's always forgiveness. It's always looking to return to reconcile. That's the Christian spiritual path.

To make this point even stronger, Jesus then tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. To get the spirit of how Jesus is telling it, it's probably better to imagine it being drawn in a comic strip rather than it being said in a grave preacher's voice from the pulpit. It's ridiculous, the parable is, and it's ridiculousness wouldn't be lost on the listeners. There probably would have been laughter as Jesus told it.

So a man owes a debt to his king of 10,000 talents. That's an insane amount of money. The annual income that Herod the Great collected from all his territories at that time was 900 talents per year. 10,000 talents is like saying a man owed "a billion dollars" to another man. His life was forever in debt in other words. So he begged to be forgiven it, all of it, and the king forgives the debt. The point is that that should have been an utterly life-transforming moment for him. He was desperate and without hope to

ever pay back what would have been a forever debt, a death sentence to him and then he's forgiven it and he walks out the door and comes upon a fellow servant who owes him how much? 100 denari. That's about one day's wages for a laborer at the time. And what happens? The guy freaks out and begins to choke him, "give me what you owe meeeee!!!!!!" I mean, it's ridiculous and probably had the people around Jesus at least chuckling if not cracking up over his story until it began to sink in what point he was making. I mean you don't get a story like that out of your head.

So when later, after all the horror of those last days, the arrest and the betrayal, the brutal death and the burial all took place and after Jesus had returned not with vengeance but with forgiveness at his resurrection and they were stunned and processing it all, it's likely that this little parable came back to mind and they recognized the debt paid by Jesus on the cross, that it was a forgiveness greater than they could have ever imagined, it's probably then they brought to mind how they, having been forgiven so much, couldn't possibly do anything but forgive any wrong ever done to them. And it sure seems in those early days that's how the disciples and the apostles operated, with a love so great, how can we but love one another? With a forgiveness so great, how can we but forgive one another? Forgiveness requires a dying to an old way of life and an opening to a new life.

Tracy and I got Britbox over the summer and have been watching incredible British crime dramas. One of the best shows I have seen in many years is a 4-episode limited series called The Victim. It is a story centered on a mother whose young son is killed walking home from school one day. The murderer, who himself was a teen, has a limited sentence and his identity is completely protected by the laws at the time. And so the show is

about the mother's struggle to reveal the identity of the murderer who killed her son and she believes she has discovered his identity finally and releases it on social media and the consequences are significant for the person she believes is the murderer. The mystery in the show is whether that's the murderer or not and what that knowledge or lack thereof does to the person and the mother and the people in their circles. But at one point the mother's new husband (she's was divorced from the father of the killed son) who has been witnessing this across the years, asks to sit down and talk to her. And he says to her:

"You're giving him the power over all of us, even now. He can't change anything of what has happened (meaning the murderer can't), but you can for both of you."

To which the mother says aghast "You're not talking about forgiveness are you? Liam's the only one with the right to forgive him!"

"No, not forgiveness for what he did to Liam, but forgiveness for what he's done to you."

"But this isn't about me," she says. "But it is about you," he counters.

"Somethings are unforgivable" she whispers.

And he says, "That's the only time that forgiveness means anything. What's the point in forgiving the forgivable? Forgiveness is how you get revenge here. Hate is not working is it? Look at you, it's killing you and it's killing everything."

"I cannot," she says, "I cannot". And the scene ends.

That's the thing about forgiveness, it is as much for the spirit and the soul of the person forgiving as it is for the one being forgiven. It changes lives, forgiveness does, if not the one forgiven then surely the one who has come to forgive. Unforgiveness treads the old paths that just expound the

suffering and the death of things. Retribution never makes good on its promise while forgiveness transforms and heals and awakens to new days.

I'd like to end with a poem from the late Wendell Berry agrarian philosopher, theologian, novelist, activist and prophet who just died a couple of weeks ago. This is his poem called "To My Mother" and I'll end with this:

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,

and all is unentangled,
and all is undismayed.

All is unentangled and all is undismayed. This is the world without end that we are called to, amen.