

Practicing Our Faith sermon series  
#4 – Practicing Forgiveness  
March 11, 2017  
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Jesus had a lot to say about forgiveness, didn't he? You know why he spent so much time talking about it? Because he knew we're not very good at it. He knows we are more inclined to follow the Law of Lamech. Ever heard of that one? Way back in Genesis 4, right after Cain and Abel, we learn about a man named Lamech, who was wronged by one of his neighbors. Probably put out the wrong candidate's campaign sign. So Lamech says, "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." Yes, Jesus knew what we humans were capable of when it came to a lack of forgiveness.

So notice how Jesus reverses the Law of Lamech when Peter asks about forgiveness. Mr. Brown-Noser tries to show Jesus just how merciful he is by suggesting a number of times to forgive someone that only a saint would consider. Seven! Whoa now, Peter, let's not overdo it. But Jesus has something better in mind. Some translations of this passage have Jesus responding, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times." That's 490 times, if you're keeping score. Which you shouldn't be doing, which is the whole point of this scripture. Jesus isn't giving us permission to get to our 491<sup>st</sup> moment of forgiveness and go, "Aha! Not THIS time!" Jesus is telling Peter that any number he thinks of is too low. Forgiveness is not a one-time event; it's a way of life that must be practiced.

Forget about the 491<sup>st</sup> time, or the seventh time. For some of us, it's hard to forgive the first time. That's why we have to practice it. During our Lenten sermon series, we're looking at disciplines of faith which take practice in order for us to grow in them. If we want our faith to continue evolving, we have to work at getting better at living it out. That's not so easy with forgiveness. We can't say to someone, "Pretend to insult me so I can practice forgiving you." We can only practice forgiveness by actually forgiving someone, and most of us have a little bit too much of Lamech in us. It's a lot easier to know that forgiveness is the right response than it is to actually forgive. On razor-thin gilt-edged paper, forgiveness sounds great. But to live it out in real life?

One of the reasons forgiveness may be difficult for us is that we don't fully understand what we're called to do when we forgive. Forgiveness is not condoning the behavior of the other person. It doesn't mean excusing the action or pretending it wasn't bad. If someone wrongs you, it's still wrong, even if you forgive them. We are called to be forgiving, not to be doormats.

Forgiving is also not forgetting. In some instances, that would be irresponsible. A lot of times we can't forget what someone has done to us. We forgive because we can't forget. Forgiveness also doesn't mean reconciliation. Yes, we are called to love, but that doesn't always have to be at close range. It's great if forgiveness does lead to reconciliation, but sometimes the person we need to forgive is dead, or moved away, or no longer in our lives. Or maybe they're not interested in reconciliation.

Those are some things forgiveness isn't; but what IS it? Forgiveness is essentially about letting go. It's about letting go of my right to hurt you back for what you've done to me. It's about letting go of our desire for vengeance. That's different than our desire for justice. I think I've told you before that in college, I worked for the school newspaper and once wrote an editorial questioning the need for our small school to have a baseball team when that funding

could be used elsewhere, like for the school newspaper. The week that article came out, I was playing in an intramural basketball game, and the referee was one of the baseball players. The first time I contested a shot, I got called for a foul. The second time I contested a shot, I got called for a foul. The third time, I just stood there and let the other person shoot, and got called for a foul. When I protested, I got a technical foul. Finally, I said to the guy, “OK, you’re obviously going to call a foul on me no matter what I do or say. In that case, is it OK if I just think something?” He said, “Sure.” I said, “Good, because I think you stink!” I got a second technical foul, but at least I earned that one. At some point in that game, the referee moved from seeking justice to vengeance.

So forgiveness is letting go of our desire to see the other person suffer as much as they made us suffer. We might say that’s unfair, that they deserve to feel what we felt, but that’s the Law of Lamech talking, that’s exactly what we have to let go of. That’s the kind of “eye for an eye” thinking that Jesus reinterprets when he calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He didn’t say we should pray for them to only get phone calls from telemarketers or gain 50 pounds. We can’t let go if we’re still holding onto a desire for payback.

There’s something else forgiveness is – forgiveness is costly. It’s scary to lay down your grudges, to trade in your pride and your power. After all, one of the great benefits of having an enemy is that you get to look good by comparison, right? Mary Gordon wrote, ““To forgive is to give up the exhilaration of one’s own assailable rightness.” In other words, to forgive is to admit that not all the mistakes that were made were by the other person. It means seeing the other person as more than their errors. Sure, they make mistakes, at times they are weak, insensitive, confused, and in pain. They’re faulty, fragile, lonely, needy, and emotionally imperfect. In other words, it means admitting they’re just like us.

That assailable rightness can feel exhilarating, right? One writer said, “Of all the deadly sins, resentment is the most fun.” But the consequences of not forgiving can be self-inflicted wounds. Writer Anne Lamott said, “I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of the Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I’m one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay that way. In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”

In practicing forgiveness, we willingly risk letting go of who a person was in order to envision a new future for who that person may be. It’s allowing for the grace of God to flow through us, saying to the other person, “I’ve made mistakes. You’ve made mistakes. I believe we’re both more than our mistakes.” And we do this, let’s remember, because God did it for us. God got so tired of forgiving us for each transgression, that God forgave us once and for all through Jesus Christ. Lewis Smedes wrote, “God invented forgiveness as the only way to keep his romance with the human race alive.” If God can forgive us for what we’ve done, is there a chance we can forgive each other?

Of course, we all know the hardest person to forgive is the one we see in the mirror. We can be our own worst critic, setting expectations unreachably high, then beating ourselves up when we don’t attain them. We create voices that remind us of all the things we have done wrong, replaying them over and over again on a masochistic loop in our brains. One of the greatest fears we have is the fear of not being good enough. If we feel we’re not good enough, we also can feel that don’t deserve forgiveness.

When we do that, we are usurping God’s role as merciful judge and putting ourselves in God’s place. We are taking a gift we have been given – God’s unmerited, unlimited grace – and rationing it out only when we feel as if we deserve it. We are forgetting the message we receive

each week at this table that we are more than our mistakes, more than our bad decisions, more than our lapses in judgment. We can be so hard on ourselves, can't we? Sometimes we need to forgive ourselves because we've done the best we can. Other times we need to forgive ourselves because we haven't done the best we can. And all the time, we need to remember that we serve a forgiving God, who even forgives our failure to forgive, and encourages us to keep practicing.

We have to remember that Jesus talks a lot about forgiveness, not only because he knows it's hard for us, but also because he knows it's the only hope we have for finding peace in this world. As long as we hold grudges and wish ill will, we stifle the beloved community of God we are called to model. That's why true forgiveness is not just about looking backward to the exoneration of guilt; it's about looking forward to the restoration of community. It's not forgetting the past; it's making the bold statement that our future does not have to be defined by our past. It's saying to the other person, "I love you more than this moment. You are more than this wrong. There is more to our story than this hurt."

We are God's child, loved and forgiven. No matter what you've done, if you sincerely ask, God will forgive you. Not just once or twice or seven times or seventy times seven times. We are so imperfect that God stopped keeping score a long time ago. So maybe we should do the same for ourselves and for each other. Maybe we should put down the score sheets and just take a walk, or make a phone call, or say a prayer.

Doing this well takes practice. We may try to forgive a few times, only to find ourselves smiling in delight when we see the other person getting a parking ticket or sporting a bad haircut. That's OK. We all know that this life will give us plenty of more opportunities to practice forgiveness. But we have to work on it, or else the only person we're hurting is ourselves. As one writer said, "Forgiveness is setting a captive free, and realizing the captive was you."

There's one more place in the Bible where Jesus talks about forgiveness. We say it every week. "And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against." Each week, when we say those words, we have a chance to practice forgiveness. And then each week, we have a chance to come to this table to be reminded that we have already received that which we have asked for. May God grant us the grace and courage to offer to others that which has been so freely, so graciously offered to us.

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