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Gospel lesson

Last week we heard Jesus tell us how to reconcile with our siblings in faith. We continue in the Gospel now with:



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/spi-unforgiving-servant/>; courtesy of Sweet Publishing illustrations by Jim Padgett

Matthew 18:21-35

NRSV

²¹ 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?"

²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The Word of God for the people of God

<Children's/Interactive time>
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What does forgiveness look like to you?
<Let them respond>

If someone hurts me, does it mean just putting up with it all the time? <Let them respond>

How many times before we say enough? How many times did Peter ask Jesus about, and what did Jesus say?
<Let them respond>

Do you think someone hurting you over and over is really sorry and really repents about what they did?
<Let them respond>

Can you forgive someone who does not repent of their sin? What does that look like? <Let them respond>

What if they do not mean to do it but they cannot help themselves – what might forgiveness involve then? <Let them respond>

Have you ever found forgiveness to involve changing your expectations of the other person – or of yourself? <Let them respond>

More often than we care to admit, our anger with another person is the result of our expectations of them which they may not have agreed to (or may not have even known about) and then failed to meet.

An example for me would be getting annoyed with a

slow driver ahead of me on the road, particularly if they speed up at a passing zone because the road is straighter and easier to drive on. I have to remind myself that it is an upper speed limit (not a target) and that I should not get mad at them for obeying the law by averaging ten miles an hour below it.

If I look to God's grace instead of anger, I get better gas mileage and I build patience (Lord knows I need more of that).

I pray that when struggling to forgive, we all look to God's grace and build more of the personal character and stronger relationships that fill the world with the love and beauty of God's kingdom.

<Hymn "God, How Can We Forgive"

TFWS #2169>

Message: Grace



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/lessons-in-leadership/week-4-sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/week-4-sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lessons-in-leadership-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Almighty God who blesses us with mercy and love,
as we take time now to further consider today's
scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may understand the justice inherent in Your
grace, forgive others as You have forgiven us, and

share Your love more freely upon this earth. Amen.

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We conclude our “Lessons on Leadership” series today with “Grace.”

“~~[Concluding our series on leadership, t]~~ This worship focuses on the transformative power of leading with grace and the ongoing work of reconciliation. We ~~[will]~~ explore how true grace isn't about avoiding conflict or being overly permissive, but rather acting as a conduit for God's abundant forgiveness while maintaining healthy boundaries.

Through communal reflection, confession, and specific rituals of reconciliation, ~~[the service will provide a]~~ let us use this] safe space to lament our hurts, extend forgiveness, and discern our next right steps together.”

<Blow a big soap bubble> Pretty, isn't it? I love blowing bubbles; it relaxes me. Children love to come over and pop them, and the little kid inside adults likes to watch bubbles float on the breeze.

I remember blowing some big ones almost twenty-five years ago in a very different environment. Many of you probably spent some time this past week remembering the 9/11 attacks and how that affected our country.

At the time, I was a volunteer with the Sherburne

Emergency Squad, and in the weeks following the collapse of the twin towers, I had the honor of going to downtown Manhattan for a day as part of the ambulance crew from Sherburne assigned to fill in the EMS coverage slot.

Post-attack emotions were intense and chaotic even two and a half weeks later. What struck me most, though, was the cloud over the city – a gray miasma devoid of joy and a smell that was just... bitter wrongness in the air. From the EMS staging area, I watched people get moving during the morning commute.

It seemed to me to be what Purgatory must be like. The normal city sounds were not really there. There was muted traffic; there were no children, there was no music, there was nothing being celebrated and nothing being argued over, just people who had to be there solemnly going about necessary business.

With no immediate EMS calls, I pulled out my bubble soap for something to do and began blowing big bubbles. They caught the breeze and floated out to the line of pedestrian commuters, and I was glad to see positive reactions from those who noticed them. They were a tiny spot of color in a very gray area.

A woman came over to where I was blowing the bubbles and asked, “Excuse me, are you with Mental Health?” At first I thought she was asking if I was a patient (certainly my crew mates teased me about that), but she explained that she was a psychiatry professional who sometimes used bubbles in therapy.

I could not undo what had been done when the planes hit those towers. I could not clean up the entire mess nor rebuild the trade center. Railing in anger or spouting hatred at whatever group I thought responsible for it would do nothing to help deal with the disaster. But by using the gifts God gave me and letting grace flow, maybe someone found a grain of healing that day, a reminder that hope and even joy can still exist in a world covered by a miasma.

Our generation will “Never Forget” 9/11, nor should we. The phrase “forgive and forget” is not in the Bible – Jesus tells us to forgive, but does not tell us to forget. The Israelites never forgot what happened in Egypt, nor should they.

But what they remember about it is not merely the terrible things that happened, but how they came out the other side of the trauma – what God did with it. They survived and healed through grace, because they trusted in the Lord instead of trying to be self-reliant or just cowering in fear.

The Lord had spent all this time training them to have faith: through all the ten plagues, through crossing a sea on dry land, and culminating in the destruction of the pursuing army. Their faith and trust in God was about as strong as it could be! They would never turn from the Lord after that, right?

How easily our human memories forget. As I get older, I find that (more and more often) my memory needs to be written down and in front of me to be reliable. We have a terrible tendency to forget what God has done

for us and what others have done for us, let alone what others are going through and could maybe use help with themselves, some patience, some kindness.

Peter came to Jesus, apparently fed up with repeated offenses by someone. Like his attempt to walk on water where he started OK then began to sink and had to have Jesus give him a hand, like his declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and then having Jesus straighten him out about what being the Messiah actually meant, Peter started out well with forgiving his brother in the faith and now was faltering.

Numbers have meaning in the Old Testament scriptures. Seven denotes perfection, like the seven days of creation. So whether he realized it or not, Peter asking about forgiving seven times was not just asking if enough was enough, it was asking if he could mold the community in his vision of perfection.

The number seventy signifies totality, like the years Israel spent in exile. Jesus's response that we are to forgive the repentant sibling seventy-seven times (totality plus perfection) means God wants us to always forgive them, to always give them the opportunity to move forward in a better path with us, toward the perfection that God envisions.

After all, as the story Jesus told depicts, what we need to forgive our siblings for is much, much less than what we need to ask God to forgive us for. You see, I doubt any of us even realizes how guilty we are of being complicit in societal sin, which reaches much farther than personal interactions.

Paul wrote about some of those personal interactions in his letter to the Romans, as we heard today. Some people who (after giving thanks to Jesus for it) ate free meat given out by pagan temples. They were judged badly by Christians who abstained from it, while those who abstained were judged badly by the Christians who used the free food because they were making their families go hungry.

Paul's point was, stop judging others on what is not your business; let God be the judge. Show love instead and live in grace. As long as no one is hurt and God is glorified, why not let it be?

And if someone (or a group of someones) **is** being hurt, do NOT let it persist. Forgiveness is NOT giving free rein to the unrepentant. It is an acknowledgment of what happened and a choice to move forward on a healthier path toward healing, with or without the perpetrator of the hurt.

That is how we know we are already forgiven by Christ, whether or not we accept the gift – Jesus is moving forward with healing for the world. We can be healed too, but only if we accept the gift; otherwise, we remain trapped in sin.

Our sins are forgiven as we forgive. If we do not let go of the sin, we cannot move out of it. How can we receive new blessings from God if we are too wrapped up in destruction from previous ones?

Whenever something terrible is done, part of me

wonders what happened to the person who did it. What would drive someone to think that was a desirable thing to do? How could they be so broken? How can we help them to heal?

The Middle East is full of turmoil. The Gaza strip has been flattened; some people there have nothing left to lose and a lot of hatred toward Israel. Instead of living in peace with their neighbors, now all of Israel must live in fear because of what their government chose to do.

Iran has suffered losses from US bombs – destruction this year included a lot of civilians as well as political targets. As we remember the hatred that drove 9/11 in 2001, I have to ask, why are we instigating it twenty-five years later? I do not see anything of Jesus in these actions, yet because our government has ordered it, we are complicit in these acts of societal sin in the eyes of the Iranians.

This will not be resolved with further fighting, to stop anyone from wanting to exact revenge; only building each side with love, renewing communities with life worth living, can enable those hurt to heal.

On a smaller scale, in our daily interactions, our disagreements and broken relationships will not be resolved by “getting them back” or by ignoring them; only showing God’s grace to build love into the relationship can enable those hurt to heal.

✝ Sometimes this means apologizing.

- ✝ Sometimes this means setting/respecting boundaries.
- ✝ It may take a long time and more work than you thought, for our perspectives are limited.

Jesus teaches that our relationships before God, relationships of healthy love, are worth it.

And God's grace is infinite. No matter how many blessings God floats our way that we burst with sin, God will provide more when we are ready.<Blow another bubble>