

Lectionary 24 Year A 2020
September 13, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness is a tough topic for many people. In our gospel reading today, we hear the question, “How often should we forgive?” But I think that forgiveness bears with it so many more questions, too. Who do we forgive? What does it mean to forgive? Do we have to forgive and forget? How do we do it? What happens if we can’t forgive? Is there anything that is unforgivable? What if we want to forgive, but we just can’t bring ourselves to do it? The list could go on and on. Forgiveness is tough and complicated.

And in our world today, forgiveness can seem nearly impossible. Our society is filled with hatred, and division, and fear. And it’s not just today, but throughout history that we’ve experienced these things within our world and within ourselves. We can look at the world’s history of hatred toward various groups of people: Jews, Muslims, people of color, immigrants, refugees, slaves, the poor, those who are gay or bi, those who identify as transgender, and so many more, and we see a history of hatred, and a history of physical and emotional wounds in need of forgiveness and healing. And on a different level, in our own lives, nearly every one of us has been wronged by another person, had feelings hurt, relationships betrayed, or received some form of physical or emotional wound from another person. In fact, I’d be willing to venture the guess that most of us have also dealt similar wounds to others as well.

And because of these wounds—those we’ve felt, those in our memories of history, and those we’ve dealt, forgiveness is a highly personal topic. If we could simply deal with forgiveness in theory, it wouldn’t be so bad. CS Lewis, in his book, Mere Christianity, says, “Forgiveness is a lovely idea until there is something to forgive.” Forgiveness as a concept is great: we want second and third chances, and I’m sure we wouldn’t mind giving some as well. But when we get into the depths of forgiveness, when we’ve been wronged and we’re asked to forgive—even commanded to forgive—it’s not so popular an idea.

I have a friend who has struggled for years with forgiveness. Not with the theory of forgiveness, but with forgiving one person in particular. My friend has deep emotional wounds from years of dealing with another family member. She has feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, worthlessness and more, that she simply can’t shake, even after years of separation from her family. Some time in therapy tended to her wounds and eased the pain a bit, but they have never truly healed. Creating and sustaining new, healthy relationships has also had an immense impact on her healing. But my friend also knows that part of the healing process requires forgiveness. In fact, she even wants to forgive her family member for her emotional wounds. She isn’t interested in revenge or retribution of any kind, she really just wants the wounds to heal, and she knows that forgiveness will help at least a little with that. Some days, it’s even like a cloud hangs over her head, not from the wounds themselves, but because of the pain of being unable to forgive and move on. As much as she wants to forgive, the wounds still fester—and the wounds remind her of how her family member treated her.

I’ve told her that forgiveness doesn’t mean moving forward without caution. I’ve told her that she doesn’t have to pretend that these things never happened to her. But when we forgive, not only do we give up our desire for revenge, but we also let go of our anger toward the other person, and we seek to move on from the events of the past. In the grander scheme of things, forgiveness does not mean overlooking injustice and cruelty. But it means that we set our gaze on change and hope for the future, rather than revenge for the past.

You see, not forgiving someone can consume us. It can imprison us in the past, and prevent us from seeing hope for the future. Not only can withholding forgiveness be difficult for those who have wronged us, but it hurts us too.

And so, Jesus wants forgiveness for us. We hear in our gospel reading that we are to forgive, “not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Pastor Roseanne Anderson, in her sermon for the synod this week suggests that maybe the focus should not be on a single event of forgiveness, but instead that, “forgiveness is a quality, a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating to the world.” Forgiveness is a way of life, and “it is nothing less than the way of Christ.”

Forgiveness is nothing less than the way of Christ. And if forgiveness is the way of Christ, we can be sure that none of us will be able to master it in our lifetime. None of us will ever be perfect at forgiveness. In fact, we even call it “practicing forgiveness.” I don’t think it’s a coincidence that “practice” can mean “carrying out an action” but also “repeatedly doing something in order to become more proficient.” We *practice* forgiveness throughout our lives, carrying it out better in some situations more than others, but it is a process, a journey, and a way of life.

My friend is continually learning about this process of forgiveness, about forgiveness as a way of life. It takes time. And maybe on her best days, she has forgiven her family member, and she looks with hope toward the future. But on the bad days, there’s still plenty of built up anger and resentment that she just can’t let go. But this just goes to show that there’s more to the journey, and that we’ll never be perfect in our forgiveness.

As we live a life of forgiveness, or of practicing forgiveness, we find hope and love. Forgiving others is an act of love, and it’s grounded first in the love that God has for us. The gospel parable today gives us a glimpse of God’s love for us. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” This king forgave the extraordinary debt of one of his slaves, one of the least in his kingdom. And so it is with God. For God, no debt, no wrongdoing, no sin, is too large to forgive.

This gives us hope. It gives us assurance that God loves us despite our failings. We never truly hear the end of what happens with the slave in the parable. Perhaps he finds a way to pay off his debt. Perhaps he is tortured the rest of his life. Or, perhaps, the king shows forgiveness once again to this slave, just like Jesus commands of us.

We know that God’s mercy is deeper and wider than we could possibly imagine. And we know that our ability to show mercy isn’t nearly as deep or wide. God’s mercy is unlimited, and the best we can do is practice by living a life of forgiveness.

We’re not always going to get it right. We’re not always going to be able to let go of the pain of the past, but we can practice. Again, as Pastor Roseanne says, “Sometimes, the pain can seem too much. Sometimes the wound can seem too raw, the memories too real. And those days, when things seem to be just too much, then we can choose to want to forgive. And some days, we may simply choose to want to *want* to forgive. But we choose, because that’s the choice that Jesus made.”

And as we practice forgiveness, we have the opportunity to see a little bit of the abundant love God has for us, and share that love with others. We are set free, bit by bit from our pain, our grudges, and our resentment, and we experience new life, filled with hope and love from God. Thanks be to God. Amen.