

Be The Church: Forgive Others
Jon Frost
Matthew 18: 21-35

We continue in our series *Be the Church* this week. As we were mapping out this series, looking at who was preaching when, and which sub-theme would fit where, we looked at the lectionary passages for each Sunday and found this passage from Matthew's Gospel - in which the theme *Forgive Others* seemed an obvious fit. To forgive others is part of what it means to be the Church.

As I've been reflecting on forgiveness in light of this passage, I've quickly realized the immense challenge of talking about something like forgiveness in the context of a 15 minute or so sermon. It would be downright impossible to say everything that would need to be said to do justice to the nuances, the challenges, and often times the excruciating pain involved in forgiveness.

Too often the Christian practice of forgiveness can come across as a neat and tidy transaction summed up in the somewhat trite expression "forgive and forget." Many times people who have been hurt, particularly victims of violence and abuse, can feel rushed to forgive out of a sense of Christian piety. Tragically, in these situations forgiveness is wielded over them in a way that only reinforces the pain.

So let me offer a disclaimer at the outset of this message. Forgiveness can be messy. It can take a long time and cannot be rushed. You might be in the midst of a situation right now in which the possibility of forgiveness seems a million miles away. As we are the church together and as we wrestle with the practice of forgiving others, we must give each other the time and space to forgive, being sensitive to the complexity of situations and the pain and hurt involved. In everything that follows as we explore this text, nothing can diminish or invalidate the uniqueness of each of our struggles to forgive.

The passage begins with a simple exchange between Peter and Jesus, which sets the stage for the story that follows. In Jesus' response to Peter's question, he shows Peter's understanding of forgiveness to be too small, not seeing how forgiving others has everything to do with the very mission of Jesus that would soon be revealed in his death and resurrection.

Perhaps Peter thought his offer to forgive someone who has sinned against him as many as seven times was generous. With typical Jesus wit, Jesus responds "not just seven times Peter," but seventy-seven. Some translations say seven times seventy. But the math is not the point. And I love this about Jesus' response. Ok, Peter is looking for a definitive answer, a sort of forgiveness checklist. So Jesus gives him one, willing to play Peter's game but in so doing exposing its ridiculousness. I mean can you imagine Peter going around to people who've wronged him saying "I forgive you! Ok, that makes 58 times. Almost there." As soon as Peter realizes how outlandish it would be to actually keep track of all this forgiving maybe, just maybe the light bulb would go off. If you're keeping track of how many times you forgive

others, you are completely missing the point. You're just biding your time until you can get back to the sweet work of revenge.

Jesus' wit continues in the story he tells with the amount of debt he uses with the characters in the story. The first servant owes the king 10,000 talents. To put this into perspective, the annual tax income for all of Herod the Great's territories was 900 talents. Your Bibles should have a footnote that 1 talent was equal to about 15 years wages for a laborer. That makes this servant's debt about 150,000 years wages. An absolutely fantastical amount. There is no way he could possibly pay this back. To his great shock, the king shows him mercy and forgives his debt.

Shortly after this monumental act of mercy, the servant encounters someone who owes him 100 denarii, the equivalent of about 100 days wages. A large amount but slightly more realistic. Instead of passing on the forgiveness of debt he was shown, he throws him into prison until he could pay the debt. The king finds out about this and in an outrage asks the first servant "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?"

The forgiveness of sins was an integral part of Jesus' ministry on earth. In so many of his encounters with individuals, the forgiveness of their sins is the climax of the interaction. And yet, in these examples of Jesus forgiving sins, something much larger is going on than the removal of an individual's guilt. Every time Jesus forgave sins, he was signaling to the people of Israel who were in exile, ruled by foreign powers for centuries wondering when God would show up - signaling to them that the exile was now over.

As the Apostle Paul would later put it in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." This gets at the heart of forgiveness. Those who would follow Jesus find that we are caught up in a movement which begins with a monumental act of grace like the forgiveness of a massive debt we couldn't hope to repay. The second half of 2 Corinthians 5:19 fills out the picture a bit more. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." In Christ, God has made the first move in reconciling the world, which includes us, to himself. The forgiveness of sins is the reality in which we live. It is the air we breathe, the waters in which we swim.

The practice of forgiveness involves us in the ministry of reconciliation which one could argue is the very mission of God in the world. As Methodist minister L. Gregory Jones puts it, "the Christian practice of forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life." It is "not only, or even primarily, a way of dealing with guilt. Instead, its central goal is to reconcile, to restore communion- with God, with one another, and with the whole creation." To refuse to forgive when it is within our reach is to deny the grace that God has so lavished upon us. On the other hand, as scholar NT Wright explains it, "Every time you forgive someone else, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you.

We are called to forgive others as part of our ministry of reconciliation. It is no less true that we also must participate in forgiveness from the other side - in seeking forgiveness.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Don Miller tells a great story about a time at Reed College where he and a small group of Christian students constructed a confessional booth in the middle of campus during a weekend festival famous for heathen extracurricular activities. Only, there

was a twist. Rather than hearing confessions from other students, they would confess sins on behalf of the Church. As they were brainstorming this idea, one of his friends said, “We are going to confess to them. 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 we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus.

I thought of this story a couple of weeks ago when, as the strength of Hurricane Harvey finally waned only after the damage had been done, a significant number of evangelical church leaders released a statement, now known as the Nashville statement, in which they re-affirmed through various articles a “traditional” view of sexuality and human gender claimed to be the Biblical viewpoint. To say nothing of the theological assumptions inherent in this statement, I found myself heartbroken at the very thought that this was the work of part of the Church. This is what scores of Christian leaders had devoted hours upon hours to? Crafting a statement that would yet again let LGBTQ folks know that the Church has drawn lines and they do not fit inside them. And to release it in the midst of one of the worst natural disasters this country has ever seen?

Is this really what the world needs from the Church? Another statement? Another document defining who is in and who is out? Far more than a church that makes position statements, the world needs a church on its knees, ready to serve and love, earning the right to be heard through acts of justice and mercy. The world needs a Church that is willing to ask for forgiveness for the pain we’ve caused to those on the margins, and to show with our words and actions that narrow and exclusive statements do not speak for the whole Church.

Every time we gather in worship, we are being trained in the practice of forgiveness so that we might live as God’s forgiven and forgiving people in the world. We baptize as a sign and seal of God’s forgiving grace which comes to us before we do anything to deserve it. We confess our sins not to earn God’s favor but because we have already received it. We hear the amazing words of assurance that tell us because we are in Christ, we have been reconciled to God. We then show that reconciliation to one another as we greet one another with the peace of Christ. We pray the words “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We share communion remembering the new covenant in Christ, sealed in his blood for the forgiveness of sins, while at the same time pointing ahead to the day when God’s kingdom will fully come and all things will be fully reconciled to God.

We are then sent out, after drinking deeply of God’s grace through the liturgy of worship, into the world to carry on the message and ministry of reconciliation. And so each week in this place we are reminded that we are the church. As we go out we are called to be the church. Forgive others because we have been forgiven.

Amen.