

“FORGIVENESS: Seventy Times Seven”
Lent 3 B (off-Lectionary)

Texts: Matthew 18:21-22
Matthew 5:23-24

Preached: 3/8/15



We continue this week our Lenten theme of Forgiveness. Last week we explored the most intimate relationships in our lives – those with spouses, significant others, close friends, soul mates. And we reminded ourselves that each of us can choose to be a blessing. We can nurture in ourselves a loving willingness to forgive.



In fact, we probably should be forgiving all over the place, forgiving each other until we're blue in the face! That reminds me of a song. It might be old and obscure, but I like it. And I can't get it out of my head. A friend gifted it to me because she thought it was right up my alley. It's not hard to figure out why! It's called **WHISTLE AND FISH by John Prine**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuUUspXPcEk>

Song Lyrics:

I been thinking lately about the people I meet
The carwash on the corner and the hole in the street
The way my ankles hurt with shoes on my feet
And I'm wondering if I'm gonna see tomorrow.

CHORUS Father forgive us for what we must do
You forgive us we'll forgive you
We'll forgive each other till we both turn blue
Then we'll whistle and go fishing in heaven.

I was in the army but I never dug a trench
I used to bust my knuckles on a monkey wrench
Then I'd go to town and drink and give the girls a pinch
But I don't think they ever even noticed me.

CHORUS

Fish and whistle, whistle and fish
Eat everything that they put on your dish
And when we get through we'll make a big wish
That we never have to do this again again? again?

On my very first job I said thank you and please
They made me scrub a parking lot down on my knees
Then I got fired for being scared of bees
And they only gave me fifty cents an hour.

CHORUS

Fish and whistle, whistle and fish
Eat everything that they put on your dish
And when we get through we'll make a big wish
That we never have to do this again again? again?

CHORUS

May God forgive us for all those times that we make selfish assumptions about our neighbors, for believing the worst, for not giving the other the benefit of the doubt, for seeing them not with the eyes of love, but with the eyes of judgment and condemnation.
pretty good to me. Amen.

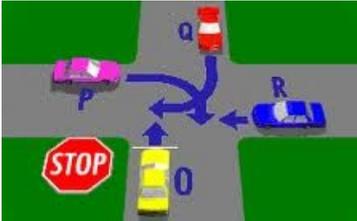


When Adam was in high school he sold women's shoes at the mall. One day when he was working he approached two women who had their backs to him. He greeted them and offered his assistance, asking if they needed anything. They ignored him.

As a sales clerk, he was used to rude customers, but it really bothered him that they did not even acknowledge his words. He decided to hang out at the counter. If these rude ladies wanted something they would have to seek him out. There he stood, nursing the thought that they had snubbed him.

A moment later, one of the women turned and started speaking to her friend in sign language. It quickly became clear that neither of these women could hear. They had not ignored Adam at all. They had not refused his help, because they never heard it. In fact, it was Adam who had been rude.

Often the little hurts that we feel, or that others feel because of us, are only false perceptions and misunderstandings.



Last week, I went out of turn at a four-way stop. As I pulled through the intersection, the person to my right, whose turn it was to go, laid into his horn. I did not mean to go out of turn. I was tired and hadn't even noticed he was there before I was. When he honked his horn, he irritated me.

Really? I thought. Give me a break. You have to honk your horn at me for that? Like you, sir, have never gone out of turn before?

Every day we gather pebbles, lots of pebbles. They raise our blood pressure, create frustration, and head our day in the wrong direction. What are we to do?



In dealing with pebbles, we can decide not to "sweat the small stuff." We can regularly practice the art of letting little things go. But how do we do that? How do we avoid holding on to the anger or irritation or resentment that comes from the pebbles thrown at us each day? And how often do we need to forgive these petty acts?



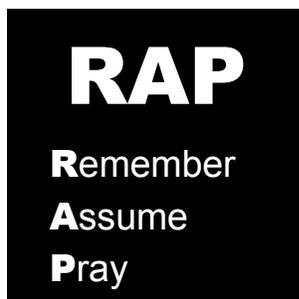
Peter asks Jesus the same basic question. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?" Peter refers to the church, but we're not talking about a large congregation. Peter's church at the time was primarily his brother, Andrew, his friends, James and John, and a handful of others. Peter was asking in essence, "Lord, if Andrew or James wrongs me, how often do I need to forgive them? Is seven times enough? I'm on six and I'm hoping seven is all that I owe them!"

Jesus' response no doubt surprised Peter. No, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. You can do the quick math in your head. 490 times. But the phrase is surely idiomatic, in other words, Jesus is saying, not a specific number of times, but an infinite number...or, forgive them until your blue in the face and then keep forgiving them!

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Stop collecting pebbles...let go of them, Jesus seems to say, and the bigger rocks, too. Our lives are meant to be characterized by grace and forgiveness. Jesus asks us to say, "You've wronged me and I could hold on to my anger, demanding some kind of satisfaction, but I choose instead to let it go and not hold it against you any longer." How do we find the capacity to do that?



Here is a three-step method summed up in the acronym RAP.

The first step is to **remember your own shortcomings**, the little sins you regularly commit. When you feel that somebody has offended you, stop and consider how many times you've done something similar. It's a bit more difficult to stay angry at somebody else when you are conscious of your own flaws.

RAP – **Remember** your own shortcomings,
Assume the best of people, and
Pray for them.

This works when someone tosses small pebbles toward us. But what if we are truly wounded and the rocks are a good deal larger? A friend has betrayed your trust, a co-worker has lied about you, a business associate has cheated you...without forgiveness, anger and resentment will only build and build. Yet we struggle with the idea.

Forgiving is not the same as *condoning*. Rather, Forgiveness means letting go of the right to retribution. We are letting go of the pain in our own lives and putting down the stones we have carried in our hearts. Yet we are also putting down the stones we might have thrown at those who wronged us.

Choosing to let go, it doesn't mean what was done to us was okay. We are simply choosing not to allow these wrongs to continue to affect us. We are choosing not to give the wrongdoer any more power over us.

And forgiving does not dismiss the consequences. If someone lies to you or betrays a confidence, you may forgive that person, but it may be a long time before you trust that person again. This loss of trust is a consequence people face by virtue of their dishonesty or betrayal, even though you may have forgiven them.



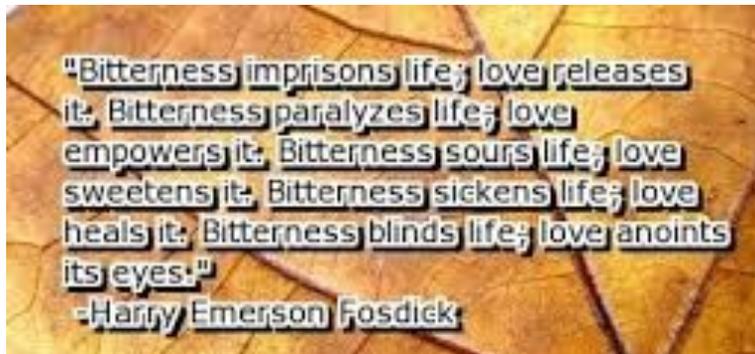
For example, the grounded teenage daughter might say at some point during the punishment, “Mom, I’m really sorry, I know I did the wrong thing. I shouldn’t have done that.” And the mother might respond, “Thank you for saying that, sweetheart. I love you so much. I understand, and it’s all right now.”

The teenager would likely come back with, “Then, am I still grounded?” To which the mother should reply, “Yes, honey, I’m sorry, but you are still grounded.”

Her being grounded was not retribution; it was a way of teaching, forming character and a way of restoring relationship.

Perhaps the hardest situation to forgive is where someone has done something serious and refuses to repent. Does God ask us to forgive in such a situation?

Here it is important to remember that forgiveness has two dimensions – the release of bitterness, anger, or desire for revenge...as well as the extension of mercy toward the one who has wronged you.

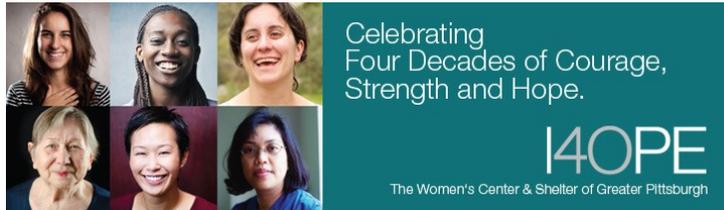


Regarding the first dimension – our own release of poison feelings, bitterness – we must forgive for our own health and well-being. The more serious the wound, the longer the process may take. But failure in this dimension gives power to the one who wronged you. It is you, not they, who are hurt by your unwillingness to forgive. It’s like lugging those stones in the backpack of your heart, they take up valuable space, drag you down, rob you of life and joy and peace.

The second dimension, extending mercy to the perpetrator, must be handled differently. It may come down the road. In fact, we may ultimately harm wrongdoers if we extend mercy too quickly or easily. Wrestling with the hurt they caused is part of their redemptive process. And for us Christians, redemption has always to be our goal. It is Christ’s goal.



Offering mercy before a person understands the need for it can diminish the gravity of the act. It gets in the way of the true goal of forgiveness, again, redemption.



Pastor Jo used to work for the Women's Center and Shelter of Pittsburgh. She helped me understand the cycle of domestic violence. Often, after the first incident of battering, an abuser feels terrible remorse. He (abusers are usually men, although not always) is overly apologetic and swears it will never happen again. He seems to have repented. The spouse takes him back. Then, in so many cases, a week or a month later, he abuses again. He feels bad again, and she may show mercy once more. But mercy rarely brings change. Instead, the victim has become an inadvertent enabler. The cycle of violence, remorse, and mercy develops a rhythm, and suddenly it's a pattern, an identifiable, quantifiable pattern repeated in unhealthy relationships too often and too numerous to comprehend. When mercy is extended too early and too often such cycles manifest themselves.

God calls people to repentance so that they may receive forgiveness. It's not an easy process, nor a comfortable one.



Jesus lays out the process – but we have not studied it enough – we don't take it to heart – we don't practice it. Jesus challenges us to initiate reconciliation, not waiting for the other; and we are not to tell our friends about the wound inflicted, but instead are to speak to the offender directly.

How many of us can be loving and forthright at the same time? How many of us are willing to put ourselves out there? Too often, if others don't notice or acknowledge the wrong they've done, we don't have the nerve to sit down and talk with them. We might complain to our friends. We might post it on Facebook. But that only makes reconciliation harder...but more than that, we now have sinned ourselves, and often our sin is worse than the sin committed against us in the first place. We let ourselves get drawn into a counter-productive cycle.



Jesus goes into great detail about the process. You can go back and read more in the Gospel of Matthew. Forgiveness is rarely easy, even with regards to small wrongs. In the case of bigger sins, large betrayals, forgiveness takes time, a long time, a lifetime in some cases, and is done with God's help and mercy, and might be a process that comes to fruition not in our time, but only in God's time.

So, finally, let us admit that this work of forgiveness will be demanding of us, when we are the offended, but also as offender. But how refreshing it is when we invite God into our relationships, when we allow the painful process of forgiveness to work in us and for us.



Forgiveness is the key to satisfaction and peace!

Father, forgive us for what we must do.
 You forgive us, we'll forgive you.
 We'll forgive each other till we both turn blue.
 And we'll whistle and go fishing in heaven.

That sounds pretty good to me. Amen.