

Forgive and Forgive  
Matthew 18:21-35  
September 17, 2023  
First Presbyterian, Luling

There are any number of things we have to do over and over and over. Laundry is tops on the list for that one. Clean house. Mow the yard. Cook meals and clean up after them. Pay the bills. Drive to work, and drive back home. Laundry. Buy groceries. Go back to HEB to get the things you forgot. Get gas in the car, and remember to get the oil changed. Homework. Did I already mention laundry? A good chunk of our waking hours are spent doing things we've already done a thousand times before.

And it's not just chores that return again and again, of course. Grief has a way of returning back to us when we thought we were already done with it. For instance, my grandmother's birthday is next Saturday. It would have been her 105<sup>th</sup> birthday, which means she died ten years ago, this October 14. I miss her all the time, but particularly this time of year, with the dates of her birth and death so close together, I grieve all over again. What would she think of the great grandchildren, including the one she never got to meet who is named after her? What would she say about politics, or church, or some decision I'm trying to make? I'll never stop missing her. The grief is different after ten years, but I still have to experience it over and over. I suspect this is not news to any of you.

We understand, at both trivial and deep levels, that a whole bunch of things in life are not one and done. We don't get through something and never ever have to think about it again, at least not very often. Why in the world then, have English speaking humans come up with a phrase like "forgive and forget"? As if we forgive a wrong against us one time, and we never need to think about it again.

By and large, forgiveness does not work this way. It's a lot harder than that, a lot more complicated, a lot more complex. I suspect this isn't news to any of you either.

When Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter likely thinks he's offering a very large number. A nice Bible number, seven. Surely no one should be expected to forgive more than just a handful of times, so Peter will get to pat himself on the back for guessing such a large number. Jesus's reply can be taken a couple of ways, and we need to hear them both.

Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy seven times.” Or you may remember earlier translations said “seven times seventy times.” Jesus’s point is the same regardless. First, and maybe primarily, Jesus is saying, you’ve applied the wrong system to forgiveness. It’s not something you can count. You need to forgive so many times you lose count. Forgiveness isn’t measured by counting. It happens as many times as it has to.

People have often taken this to mean you let someone wrong you in the same way 77 times, and then forgive them for that repeated wrong 77 times. But I don’t think I hear Jesus saying that. This is the second way we can hear Jesus’s words. I think he’s saying that this person wrongs you, and it will take an uncountable number of times to forgive them. It’s something that you return to, over and over. You have to do it, again and again. This is not what we want to hear, that forgiveness is harder and more repetitive than we had hoped, just for one person doing one wrong thing to us.

This brings me to a couple of other things. Forgiveness is something we primarily do for ourselves. It’s something we do for the health of our own souls. Forgiveness is a soul strengthener, like we talked about a couple weeks ago. It doesn’t depend on the other party repenting or apologizing. It doesn’t require you have any further contact with the other person at all. Forgiveness frees us from being held captive by that wrong, ruminating on it, feeling the betrayal again. That’s what I mean by saying that forgiveness is something we do to keep our souls healthy.

And like anything else we do to strengthen our souls, we have to keep practicing it, keep doing it, return to forgiveness over and over again. It’s so incredibly easy to pick that betrayed feeling up again, to remember the wrong done to us. And then we have to let it go again. Set it down again. Forgive again. As many as seventy seven times. Until we’ve lost count. As many times as it takes.

We pray each week, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We request, and expect, and rely on God’s repeated forgiveness of us. We rest in the assurance of God’s endless grace. And if we are called to practice the same forgiveness, then our forgiveness needs to be uncountable, too.

As David and I were looking for hymns for this week, he said there is “an embarrassment of riches” in all the hymns about forgiveness. With a few exceptions, which we chose for some of our hymns this week, they are almost all about God forgiving us, about God’s deep capacity for forgiving us, over and over again. It’s a whole lot tougher to sing about us needing to forgive others over and over again. But the Lord’s Prayer, along with the parable we read but haven’t

talked about, remind us that our capacity to forgive is all tied up with God's capacity to forgive. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

I want to close today with a poetic prayer reflection by Jan Richardson. She wrote this specifically for this passage, and it touched on so many things that I wanted to say, and much more eloquently than I have. So let's pray with her words:

*THE HARDEST BLESSING*

*If we cannot  
lay aside the wound,  
then let us say  
it will not always  
bind us.*

*Let us say  
the damage  
will not eternally  
determine our path.*

*Let us say  
the line of our life  
will not always travel  
along the places  
we are torn.*

*Let us say  
that forgiveness  
can take some practice,  
can take some patience,  
can take a long  
and struggling time.*

*Let us say  
that to offer  
the hardest blessing,  
we will need  
the deepest grace;  
that to forgive  
the sharpest pain,  
we will need  
the fiercest love;  
that to release  
the ancient ache,  
we will need*

*new strength  
for every day.  
Let us say  
the wound  
will not be  
our final home—  
that through it  
runs a road,  
a way we would not  
have chosen  
but on which  
we will finally see  
forgiveness,  
so long practiced,  
coming toward us,  
shining with the joy  
so well deserved.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/09/09/the-hardest-blessing/?fbclid=IwAR2RWJ0KymOZcnng2ZHml7v0VuuaWiPsMtGztsWjLuBLk0kqvgovYBOy3h8>