



FORGIVENESS

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 19, 2020

North Congregational Church New Hartford, Connecticut

WORSHIP FOR THE TWENTIETH TIME
THAT WE ARE NOT GATHERING IN OUR SANCTUARY
BECAUSE WE WISH TO HONOR THE GOVERNOR'S REQUEST FOR
PHYSICAL DISTANCING IN ORDER TO PREVENT THE SPREAD
OF THE CORONAVIRUS THAT IS TRAVELING AROUND THE GLOBE

FOR YOUR MEDITATION

“... if you forgive someone for something they did to you, it doesn’t mean you agree with what they did or believe it was right. Forgiving that person means you have chosen not to dwell on the matter anymore; you have moved on with your life.”

— Idowu Koyenikan, [Wealth for All: Living a Life of Success at the Edge of Your Ability](#)

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
....It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
-Portia, Act IV, Scene 1, *The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare (1584-1616)

THE PEACE OF CHRIST It is normally our custom when we gather to extend the Peace of Christ to one another. Even though we are physically apart at this time, may you know that peace.

INVITATION TO WORSHIP

How good and right it is for us to come into God's presence at our Sabbath worship service. Here we are privileged to take time to reflect in light of God's will for our lives. Here we give thanks, free to unburden ourselves, and be honest about our joys and challenges. If we are carrying any hurts or resentments, we are free to confess them and ask for God's healing. As God's guided and forgiven people, may we be inspired to extend mercy and forgiveness and grow in our ability to love one another.

MUSICAL INVITATION TO WORSHIP

Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive

Tune: DE-

TROI

<https://youtu.be/kv0sXSBH2ks>

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

Proverbs 17.9

One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend.

Colossians 3.13

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Matthew 18. 21-22

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.

MORNING MESSAGE

“...As we forgive those who trespass against us”

The Rev. Marcia Lynn Cox

Is there anyone or any situation in your life that you need to forgive? Who or what do you need to forgive, and why?

What is your thinking about the Christian command to forgive? How difficult is it for you? Can you extend forgiveness easily? or are you more apt to hold a grudge?

Three Sundays ago I had the privilege of reflecting on the matter of prayer: what its purposes are, whether or not God grants us all of our needs and desires, how it changes us and what we might rightly ask. In order to consider that last question, I turned to the The Lord's Prayer, the prayer according to the gospel of Matthew that Jesus taught, the prayer we say together at every worship service. So I thought it would be good this summer to reflect on the things that Jesus told us to ask for in that prayer. Last week we considered the phrase, "On earth as it is heaven," and imagined what it would be like to bring heaven to earth. This week, we come to these words, "Forgive us our sins (trespasses, debts) as we forgive those who sin against us." This Sunday and next I will be meditating on the topics of our needing to be both forgiving and forgiven.

I find the issue of forgiveness to be extremely provocative, and in certain situations it can be very, very difficult, to forgive.

When I was training to be a hospital chaplain in New York over twenty five years ago, I was in the company of clergy people from a variety of faiths. At lunchtime, we would often sit around the cafeteria debating religious and spiritual matters: it was one of the best years of my life.

From time to time, I would engage with rabbis, and the topic of forgiveness came up, usually in relation to the Holocaust. The more I learn about it, the more outraged and disbelieving I become. If you have ever spoken with someone of the Jewish faith, you know how difficult it is for them to forgive Hitler and his supporters.

Chaim Herzog, who was the President of Israel in the mid-eighties. In 1987 he visited Bergen-Belsen the concentration camp now located in West Germany, where 50,000 people died at the hands of the Nazis. This is what he said: “I do not bring forgiveness with me, nor forgetfulness. The only ones who can forgive are the dead, and the living have no right to forget.”

What a powerful statement! Any compassionate human being can certainly relate to those deep emotions of hurt and outrage. Some Jews I have spoken to about this very painful memory have told me that it is simply not possible for them to forgive the Holocaust. One rabbi even asked: Why should I forgive? That is a very good question, and perhaps the most important question that we can ask about forgiveness.

At the risk of being glib and simplistic, I would answer that we need to try to forgive simply because Jesus not only instructs us to forgive, but was radically forgiving himself, even, as scripture tells us, of those who crucified him.

In light of this very difficult teaching, I’d like to offer some observations about forgiveness. FIRST, it is an extremely RADICAL notion. One theologian, John Robert Seeley, a 19th century British professor of Latin, wrote that the law of forgiveness is “Christ’s most striking innovation in morality.”

In our scripture passage from the book of Matthew, Peter goes to Jesus and asks: “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Jesus replies: “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times— or as some translations read —seventy times seven (which is 490 times!). Now that seems pretty radical-- pretty difficult, doesn’t it?

On the other hand, let me ask you this: How many of you out there have been married? How many of you have children? How many of you are long-time members of a church? How many of you have a job?

Or friends? All tolled, do you think that you have forgiven your spouse, your children, your co-workers, friends and fellow Christians that many times? I'll bet you have--at least I hope that you have. I daresay that many of us have forgiven people many more times than 490!

Since we likely have all been hurt, if we don't forgive, we will continue to be hurt. So, **SECONDLY** it is necessary, simply for our psychological and emotional health that we forgive. As difficult as forgiveness can sometimes be, it is also a selfish, or at least a **SELF-PROTECTIVE** act.

If we are not able to forgive, we will be very miserable, angry people indeed and we won't be able to live fully healthy and productive lives.

If we rarely forgive, we will be cold-hearted, harsh and judgmental. In ruminating over our grudges, we will miss so many of the good things that God brings into our lives. Holding a grudge demands time and energy, doesn't it?

But at the same time, when we forgive, we are looking beyond ourselves. So **THIRDLY**, isn't the point of forgiveness to heal what has been hurt or broken and ultimately to restore our relationships?

Anthony Robinson, a UCC pastor and writer observes this, quoting Paul from the Epistle to the Galatians,

" 'If someone falls into sin,' said Paul, 'forgivingly restore him.' The point is not to judge

and dismiss someone. Nor is it to prove we are right and they are wrong. The point is restoration. Getting a relationship back. Fixing something that's broken. Restoring a sister or brother to community."

Here's wisdom from the book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible that is one of our scripture readings today:

"One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend. (Proverbs 17.9)

This is particularly relevant to the people we see frequently. So here is a THIRD observation: forgiveness involves COURAGE.

For example, say today's psychologists, if someone hurts us, it's a good idea for us to speak with the person about our feelings, like our scripture lesson this morning suggests. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." I'm not sure that I would suggest approaching a person in such an accusatory manner, but if we speak gently and from the heart, we might just find that the person didn't mean to hurt us at all, or that our feelings or expectations were unreasonable. Even if the person did indeed do or say something hurtful, if he confesses, he will surely learn and grow from his mistake. Forgiveness is both necessary and indeed possible in such a case. After all, what more can we expect from one another?

At the same time, to be honest and practical, not all relationships can be restored, in which case we need to just move away and move on. But without carrying the hurt along. If we do, we will only continue to hurt ourselves.

With that in mind, however, here is a FOURTH observation about forgiveness: It is a PROCESS.

We're not naturally inclined to forgive, and so we must take some steps and some time to get past feelings of hurt, anger or outrage. Forgiveness doesn't always happen quickly--nor should it. It seems to me that, on the one hand, if we forgive too easily and too readily, we may become people without values and standards. After all, is any and all behavior, no matter how hurtful, acceptable? Of course not.

In more serious or life and death matters, forgiveness is clearly more difficult.

I remember an interview on *The Larry King Show* during the time of the Oklahoma City bombings.

Larry's guest was the Rev. Robert Schuller, then the pastor of the famous Crystal Cathedral in California, and he asked Dr. Schuller if we--and the families of the victims of that terrible event--could and should forgive Timothy McVeigh and his accomplices.

Dr. Schuller said something that I found most instructive. He replied that while forgiveness is necessary, forgiveness does not mean approval.

When we forgive, we are not condoning insensitivity, meanness, cruelty, evil or pathology. We are simply refusing to respond in like manner.

Also, when we are forgiving, we are not necessarily forgetting. And nor should we, because if we forget, we are affirming the doing of the hurtful actions again and again.

By remembering, we vow never to stop the behavior again and to learn and grow. This is why have Museums to the Holocaust and the African American experience.

Still, time can be on our side. When I think about the hurts that I have experienced, I realize that as the days and years pass, I think less and less about them. New experiences help us as well.

If we find forgiveness difficult, we simply have to leave some things to God. This leads me to my FIFTH observation. It is a process in which God needs to be present and active. Yes, we need to forgive in order to get on with the business of life, because if we hold grudges, it is not good for us. So we forgive, on one level, to maintain our health and

sanity. But we also forgive because it is a gift from God--it is an act of grace that we need to extend to others.

This is quite a difficult thing that Jesus requires of us. We're the ones who have been hurt, we're the ones in pain, yet we're the ones who are being asked to reach out with forgiveness. Often, the only way that we can do that is with the help of God.

One of my favorite theologians is Richard Rohr. He writes this:

Forgiveness reveals *three goodnesses* simultaneously.

When we forgive, we choose the goodness of the other over their faults, we experience God's goodness flowing through ourselves, and we also experience our own capacity for goodness in a way that almost surprises us. We are finally in touch with a much Higher Power, and we slowly learn how to draw upon this Infinite Source. (-Richard Rohr, Forgiveness, blog, August 30, 2017)

I'd like to share with you a SIXTH and final observation. And this is perhaps the most obvious, but one that we often lose sight of.

God promises us that if we enter into covenant with God and come to God with contrite hearts, asking for mercy and another chance, God grants us forgiveness.

If God can grant forgiveness to us, surely we can and should grant it to others.

If we can't forgive others, then we must think of ourselves as perfect, never in need of mercy. And this is why we ourselves need to be constantly reflecting on our own Behaviors and engage in the process of confession, which will be the theme for next Sunday's meditation.

In Christ, we are a forgiven people. Thus, with the grace of God, we must and can be forgiving. If God and other people forgive me, it would be totally unreasonable and narcissistic of me to think that I'm the only person in the world who deserves forgiveness!

Anthony Robinson again: "If someone falls into sin, forgivably restore him. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out."

It is no wonder that Jesus wisely instructs us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

As we have all learned from our life experiences, forgiveness isn't always easy.

But as Christians, we are called to forgive time and again, throughout the course of our lives.

Life is not perfect, and some offenses that are done to us or to others are so outrageous that forgiving may be extremely difficult, and even take a lifetime. Some situations are simply unresolvable, and the only solution after talk and negotiation, and the expression of hurt and even anger, is to walk away, if we can.

But no matter how easy or difficult the circumstances, we must always turn to God for strength, grace and healing.

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What situations are in need of your forgiveness?

What needs to be done in order for forgiveness to occur?

And, most importantly, what does God want and how can God intervene?

My friends, may the spirit of God's grace and peace, justice and mercy, healing and reconciliation be born in our hearts this day. AMEN.

OFFERING

Although we are not gathering in the sanctuary for worship on Sundays for the time being, the church continues to have expenses. So it would be most appreciated if pledges and offerings could be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 307, New Hartford, CT 06057. Thank you for your generosity.

MUSICAL REFLECTION
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A Heart That Forgives

-Kevin Le-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3VT2bMpoYY>

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, we come to you, mindful of the fact that during this time in our history restrictions on our movements and so many things we enjoyed not long ago have been taken away, frustration can cause your people to exhibit behaviors that are less than kind. We can be hurt by friends and loved ones, or acquaintances, or people we do not know. And so we must especially call upon the power of forgiveness. Please enable us to find love in our hearts and to move past things that have been said and done to offend us, so that we can all work together for the common good.

While we may be inconvenienced and challenged in certain ways, we are especially grateful for the medical professionals, public servants and all those people who have jobs that make our lives easier, and might even endanger their own lives during this time.

We pray for healing everywhere, not only for ourselves but for all who suffer...
...from violence and injustice, poverty and prejudice, and lack of belonging or purpose,
...from diseases of the body, mind and spirit, and those who love and care for them.

We pray for people facing death and those who minister to them,

and those who are grieving the loss of loved ones and people who served the community and the common good.

In our own lives, we bring to you now our joys and concerns....

All these things we offer, using the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. AMEN.

CLOSING HYMN

God, How Can We Forgive

Tune: LEONI

First Plymouth Church, Lincoln, Nebraska

<https://youtu.be/zuBTuh4CsyE>

OUR COMMON COMMISSION

Let us now forth into the world in peace.

Being of good courage.

Holding fast to that which is good.

Rendering to no one evil for evil.

Strengthening the fainthearted.

Supporting the weak.

Helping the afflicted.

Honoring all persons.

Loving and serving the Lord,

And rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Grateful to be a member of a community of reconciliation, go forth this day knowing well the power of forgiveness. As harmony has been restored to your relationships with God and your neighbor time and time again, extend mercy and kindness to everyone you meet. In Jesus' name. AMEN.

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