



## “What it Means to Give: The Power of Forgiveness”

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*Matthew 18:15-20*

If another member of the church sins against you...just talk about them behind their back. If another member of the church sins against you...just call a bunch of people in the church to complain. You may even want to start a letter-writing campaign. If another member of the church sins against you...just send them a nasty email. Copy the Chair of Deacons. And, while you're at it, CC the Pastor. If another member of the church sins against you...don't say anything. Just avoid them. Un-friend them on Facebook. And, if you can't avoid them on Sundays, then just leave the church entirely.<sup>1</sup>

Some of us might deal with conflict in this way, but in the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks directly to his followers and tells them what their fellowship should be like. If a sister or brother in the faith hurts you, angers you, saddens you, or does you wrong in any way...the biblical text says that you go and talk to them about it directly, one on one. Not only is this manner of working out difficulties meant to spur forgiveness, it does so in a grace-filled way. The offended party doesn't drag the offender through the mud. If it gets worked out individually, no one else needs to know. Forgiveness is available without fear of embarrassment or public scorn. It can be done quietly. Lovingly. Gracefully. However, when that doesn't work, you bring another person or two with you. This heightens things a bit, but still allows for grace amidst discretion. Three or four wise people are better than two. And then, if things can't be worked out there, you bring it to the whole church. You talk with the entire assembly and pray about the conflict. You ask God to help. “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” And so, this passage for today is describing inevitable conflicts in the church and how to solve those conflicts with the grace, love, and forgiveness of Jesus.

I think there is power in forgiveness. Forgiveness is meant to be at the core of who we are as a community of faith, and to be honest with you, if we can't forgive ourselves in the church, how can we ever be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world? In order for us, as Christians, to change the world and in order for us to learn what it truly means to give our time, talents, and treasures to the work of God, we must lean into the power of forgiveness.

But is this really how Jesus wants the church to handle conflict and offer forgiveness? An interesting thing about this text is that the word “church” is a very common term used by the Apostle Paul, but in the four Gospels, ecclesia or church occurs in only two places- here in the Scripture passage for today and in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew when Jesus says that Peter is the rock on which the church will be built. Since Jesus never really used the term ecclesia, this leads me to think that this particular lectionary passage could be a later addition to the Gospel and possibly something Jesus didn't say at all. Although I think there is intrinsic value to

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<sup>1</sup>. Morley, Rick. “A Garden Path.” [www.rickmorley.com](http://www.rickmorley.com). August 23, 2011.

handling conflict by gradually increasing the size of the listening community, I think excommunicating someone, kicking them out of the body of believers, doesn't seem to jive with Jesus's thoughts and actions about forgiveness.

The Scripture for today is also rather jarring because of its odd placement. This Pauline notion of conflict-in-community and church discipline separates two of the most graceful and expansive stories in the Gospels. If you look at the pericope before this text, you will find the parable of the lost sheep, which ends with Jesus saying it is not the will of God that any, meaning not even one of these little ones, should be lost. The shepherd, says Jesus, is constantly seeking ways to reconcile the lost lamb and bring it safely back into the fold. Then, immediately following the text for today is the story of Peter probing the limit of forgiveness with Jesus, asking, "Lord, how many times should we forgive? Seven? Help me set the boundaries!" With Jesus patiently responding, "No, Peter, seven times seventy, unlimited. So, put away your calculator."

I think there is a problem with this "three strikes and you're out" approach in today's lesson. For me, the problem is that this method of dealing with a person who has wronged someone is totally, completely against everything Jesus teaches about forgiveness. In fact, if you read the entire eighteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel instead of reading just these few selected verses, it would appear that this punitive process flies in the face of what Jesus teaches.

But what do we do when a person has wronged us? What if that person has hurt the community and continues to hurt themselves? Well, the text says they need to be put away from us. Jesus says that the gathered people should treat the one who has sinned, as society would treat a Gentile or a tax collector. But treating those who hurt us as Gentiles and a tax collectors seems like very tough advice from Jesus as it appears we should give up on them and treat the people with whom we are in conflict as hopeless and irreclaimable. But this is where the text gets tricky. Remember, this is Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew's Gospel, who were the first people to come to Bethlehem and bow down to worship the Christ-child? The magi who were Gentiles. And exactly what was it that Matthew did for a living before Jesus called him to be a disciple? He was a tax collector. And, according to Matthew, who keeps popping up as the unexpected recipients of Jesus's attention and healing powers? Gentiles. Now, as a Christ follower, if we are to treat someone as a Gentile or a tax collector it ultimately means that we are to treat them exactly as Jesus treated them.

Jesus never set limits to human forgiveness. We are empowered to forgive seventy times seven. So, this text today doesn't say to give up on someone. It tells us that Jesus finds no person hopeless...and neither must we. There is no hopeless person outside or inside the church. And if we are full of forgiveness then we will give all of who we are to make sure no one is left out of the love of God. We include people in the love of God by beginning to take seriously what God wants for us, because what God wants for us isn't more hurt or more hatred or more anger or more guilt or more hurtful words. What God wants isn't for things to go back to the way they've always been or the way they were before. What God wants for us and why Jesus died for us is wholeness and health and reconciliation.

One person who embodies forgiveness and reconciliation is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was raised in one of the shanty towns where black South Africans were segregated. He and his family

experienced Apartheid firsthand. Several of his friends were imprisoned and even killed in the violence that defined South Africa. When that whole system of oppression finally ended, the South African people faced a crossroads: would they simply live out the script of every oppressed people throughout history, whereby the oppressed become the oppressors? Or, could they find a different path that would lead to healing for both oppressed and oppressors alike?<sup>2</sup>

The leaders of the new South Africa formed a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to try to seek that different path. Instead of handing out punishment, the whole purpose of the commission was to give victims the chance to tell their stories, to have their suffering acknowledged, and to confront their oppressors in person. It gave the oppressors a chance to tell the truth about their crimes and seek forgiveness and clemency. They had no idea what would happen from this, but as it turns out, time after time, oppressed and oppressor came together and experienced genuine reconciliation based on their shared experience of crimes acknowledged and crimes forgiven.

One of the foundational principles of this experience was what Tutu called “Ubuntu.”<sup>3</sup> It is a word that stands for the idea that we all share a common humanity. It says that the only way the human family can thrive is together. That means that when we look at another human being, even someone who has wounded us deeply, we must try not to see an enemy, but rather a fellow human being, a sibling, a kindred soul. It seems to me that, in order to pray the prayer, “forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” and mean it, we have to practice “Ubuntu”—we have to acknowledge that we share a common humanity even with those who wrong us. When we can look at those who inflict pain on us and see a fellow human, then we can begin to forgive as we have been forgiven. Then we can begin to set them and ourselves free from the vicious circle of bitterness, hatred, and violence, and move into the freedom and power of forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Forgiving isn’t easy and asking for forgiveness is uncomfortable. So, how do we as a church be a giving and forgiving community? We must remember to first communicate and talk to each other when we are angry. If that doesn’t work, we must come back to church leadership. I’m sure Jesus had to do this all the time with his disciples, that unruly group of fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, and two brothers known as the Sons of Thunder. There may have been days when Jesus felt he would have been better off without disciples. But he knew that every person mattered; he knew that the community needed everyone, even the doubting Thomases, the irrational Peters, and the tax collecting Matthews; he knew that forgiveness and mercy and grace were the only ways to create a community of loving and giving and forgiving believers. Jesus wanted the spirit of the living God to dwell in this gathered group.

As for us, being disciples today means doing the hard work of forgiveness. If we as a church are in conflict with each other, if we are an unforgiving fortress, walled off from each other, we will not be a place where the Holy Spirit desires to reside. However, if we are a church that builds bridges and fosters forgiveness, we can lose the power of prejudice, principalities, and

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<sup>2</sup>. Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time*, 52-58.

<sup>3</sup>. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*, 47; cf. also Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 25-28.

<sup>4</sup>. Tutu & Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 150-51.

partialities; we can loose the divisiveness and hate that binds us on earth; we can loose and set free heaven's grace, mercy, and redemption upon all of creation, the tax collector, Gentile, and sinner among each of us and in each of us. We, as a church, must be an example to the world of forgiveness and justice. And once we are a forgiving and loving church, we will better able to give that love and reconciliation to the world.

An anonymous story tells of a Scottish doctor whose books were examined after his death. It was found that a number of accounts were crossed out with a note, "Forgiven - too poor to pay." But the physician's wife decided that these accounts must be paid and proceeded to sue for the money. The judge asked one question, "Is this your husband's handwriting?" When she replied that it was, he said, "Then there is no tribunal in the land that can obtain this money when he has written the word 'Forgiven.'"

As the church, the body of Christ, a forgiving and giving community, we gather every Sunday to celebrate the difference Jesus's forgiveness makes in our lives. We remember that the act of forgiveness that matters most happened on a hill called Calvary two thousand years ago. We acknowledge that we are all tax collectors, Gentiles, and sinners. We acknowledge that we are all the lost sheep and that the shepherd is out searching for each one of us. And we acknowledge that in this place, in this community, we experience the presence of Christ in our midst and the forgiveness found in his death in a way that is so real we can taste it: in the bread and in the cup, in our zeal for justice, in our forgiveness of others, and in our fellowship around the tables with those who are different and with whom we disagree. And it is in this Christ-like forgiveness that we find the strength we need to overcome weeks like last week with hurricanes, abuses of power, hurting neighbors, and fear of war. And it is in this forgiveness that we will live lives that are different and lives that make a difference, not just on Sunday morning, but each and every day.

And so, as we begin stewardship month, we realize that our relationship with Jesus means that the word "forgiven" is written on each of our lives and in each of our hearts. In order for us to give to a world in need, we must get our own church house in order. Like the lost sheep, we must search after each of us who goes astray. We need to realize we are all sinners. We need to forgive each other seventy times seven. We need to honor and respect each other inside the church so that honor and respect will spill out into the world. We must learn that when conflict is allowed to go unchecked and we do not handle disputes with openness, love, and the care of community, life and energy can be sapped out of this place. We must remember that because we are FOR-given, it opens us up TO give to the world.

Sure, we'll have conflicts within our congregation from time to time. Sure, forgiveness will continue to be difficult within Christianity and within the world. Sure, it'll be tough to resolve our disagreements and differences. But our forgiving Savior tells us we can be people who bring reconciliation and redemption to the world. We should do it...we need to do it. We must be a giving and forgiving community.