

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Surprising Insights Into Forgiveness"  
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Proper 19

Right since the beginning of creation, God determined that it wasn't good for us to be alone as human beings. So he gave us family, starting with Adam and Eve, and community beyond our families. And throughout the Scripture, we are invited to love each other. Now the choice of the first human beings to rebel against God's ways and our similar choices flings us into a difficult place. It is hard to love.

It is hard to love as Jesus loved, hard to be sacrificial in our loving others, hard to be creative in our loving others, hard to be persevering in our loving everyone we meet, not just those close to us, and hard to keep on loving when conflict arises. In short, the choice to love as God urges us to love is a serious and permanent choice.

This is true also for parents who have experienced the miracle of the birth of their child. There are times in the middle of the night, when sheer will power comes forth, not a warm cuddly feeling for that infant, particularly if they are vocal. And the same happens when that two year looks you in the face and firmly says "No." And later on, certainly before the age of majority, when he or she decides that they don't want to do what the family wants to do, how do you love them then? All this is before Krysta and Keith, behind many of us as parents, and before many other parents and parents to be.

The choice to love is a willingness to be open to being hurt. It is the risk of all relationships. To care about someone else or even any institution such as a church, comes with the risk of being hurt by opening ourselves to that person or institution. The question is not so much whether we will be hurt, but rather what we will do with that hurt once it happens.

Because we can hold onto our hurts and embitter ourselves with dwelling on how badly we have been treated. We can even choose to hate, or worse, to not care at all about the other person or institution or community. Apathy is worse than hate, because it attempts to disengage and simply not care about a sin or wrong that has been done, where hate is an active response that usually leads to some resolution, whether righteous or sinful.

Sometimes the sin can be monumental, such as varying forms of abuse and violence. Sometimes the sin can be just an offhand comment that slipped out of someone's mouth, yet wounded and stung the recipient.

Did you notice the examples that Paul used in the Roman church? These would probably not be problematic today, certainly not church-splitting issues: eating vegetables vs. eating meat, and celebrating holidays. You have to understand that the marketplace of the day sold meat that had been sacrificed to idols, as it had been butchered. So for some Christians, they thought they couldn't eat the meat anymore because they had given up serving those gods, and chosen to serve the One True God, through Jesus Christ.

Other Christians said, "No, those aren't even real gods. So whatever was done in their name doesn't even count." We can eat whatever we please, and give thanks to the One True God. And so you can see the arguments that were taking place, possibly strong enough to establish a Vegetarian Church versus an Omnivorous Church, or at least Carnivorous. Similarly, there were some who arguing for celebrating all the Jewish festivals while others were arguing for fewer, perhaps only once per week.

So Paul taught that we should try to get along in these grey areas of practice. The meat eaters have more freedom, but that doesn't make them right. The vegetarians are seeking to honour God with their actions, and so are the meat eaters. We need to work together in spite of some of our differences that are not crucial, and we need to forgive one another where we have hurt one another.

This is crucial for the church. More recently in church history the differences might have been between alcohol drinkers and abstainers, dancers and non-dancers, or perhaps what one ought to do on the rest of Sunday, which was a major discussion up until twenty years ago or so.

Jesus gets at the heart of the matter, when Peter is bold enough to broach the matter of forgiveness, and specifically how many times you should forgive a fellow believer. Peter is even bold enough to suggest seven times in the context of some rabbis teaching that you should forgive three times, then not forgive after that. Of course, we know that Jesus then says, "seventy times seven." This is not a mathematical exercise, where we can count up to 490, or 77, depending on your translation, then quit. It is Jesus teaching us that

we should constantly walk in forgiveness, with everyone God puts in our path. Paul teaches: "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18)

But this teaching of walking in forgiveness, that is, living out forgiveness is a real challenge in an age where abuse is prevalent, where most women are abused and many men are as well, whether as children or later in life. This is in an age where people in power abuse their position of privilege and harm others. This is in a context of many families not being safe. How can we be expected to forgive when such terrible sin has taken place?

First of all, it is a choice to forgive. The only reason the Lord urges us to forgive is for our health and well being. Several points should be made here, which come from the Living Waters course, a course for inner healing and wholeness.

One, getting in touch with what needs to be forgiven is the first and sometimes most difficult step. If you whitewash another's sin against you by saying "(s)he did the best (s)he could do," then you are not in a position to forgive. You need to feel the gravity of the sin against you. Many Christians have been trained to deny how bad the offenses against them are. Admitting how others have sinned against you is the first step to truly being able to forgive them.

Two, let the Lord access our hearts. He makes a way for us to own the pain of our woundedness, no matter how painful, to face that truth at the Cross and to forsake denying the pain. Rather than objectifying the abuse or hurt, let the pain come. This doesn't mean forcing the feelings to come. It does mean asking God for the grace to own our responses to the sins against us.

Three, how do we know we are ready to forgive someone? We need to be aware of the balance between an quick and easy "I forgive you" without counting the emotional cost of the sin, versus waiting for an emotional experience many not come the way you expect.

Four, confess the sin against you, and ask God to take it into Jesus' cross, thus being bound away from you. Name the person who has hurt you. State specifically and concretely how they have sinned against you. It's good to invite a fellow believer to be with you at this point to verbalize the truth that Jesus has taken the darkness of that sin into himself.

Five, simply forgive her or him. We need to forgive our wounders, and to lay our wounds and our wonders at the foot of the Cross. As we do, this means giving up the right to vindicate ourselves, or even to stand as a judge over that person, as Paul says in Romans 14.

Six, forgiveness also involves releasing a person from our expectations of what (s)he should have been. We grieve what we had hoped for in that relationship. They have not lived up to our expectations, but will choose to not hold these expectations over them any more.

Finally, we ask the Lord to release and cleanse us from the bitter effects of unforgiveness that have accompanied our wounds.

Jesus goes so far as to ask us whether we would want God to hold the standard of unforgiveness we might choose for ourselves as His standard against us. Jesus says it's as if we have been forgiven millions of dollars, and then choose to go out and threaten someone to whom we have lent a few dollars.

Sometimes the person to forgive is no longer alive, and yet the need to forgive is as strong as ever. Choose to forgive them. Sometimes we think we have already forgiven a person, yet we might experience ongoing judgments and condemnations of that person, false imaginings about him/her, malice, vengeance, gossiping, hardness of heart toward them, self-righteousness, pride, rejection, a whole host of negative associations that shows us we need to forgive anew using the above seven steps. Forgiveness can bring an instant measure of freedom, but it also is a process and a journey. That's the seventy times seven.

And if you need extra help to address any issues, please don't hesitate to ask the Minister, an Elder or a Christian friend. Walking together means learning to forgive. Let me close with this: If the church has hurt you in some way, may I stand in for the church, and ask your forgiveness. Because we are far from perfect, and have much to learn in loving and forgiving.

I noticed at one of the large bookstores in town that Forgiveness is still being written about as the way to establish long lasting relationships. And so it is.