

## ***The path to Love – Forgiveness***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
September 13, 2020  
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

So Jesus, let me get this straight, you want us to forgive over and over again?"

"That right, Peter."

"You just told us a moment ago, that if we have a dispute with someone in our church, we are to try to take it up directly with them privately. If they are not showing signs of understanding the offense or harm that they have caused, then we are to bring another person from the congregation, maybe two, along, once again to present the concern with the offending congregant. If they don't understand, take it before ***the whole church community.***"

"You understand the process well, Peter." Jesus replies.

"That process is well and good, but Jesus, some people are just belligerent! How much slack do you expect us to give them?!"

So was the scene between Jesus and Peter just prior to today's Gospel reading that culminated.

How many times must I forgive? One...Two...Seven time? No Peter, 77 times.

Jesus here is not at all implying about cheap forgiveness. Unfortunately, I suspect that this very passage has been used in Christian circles to offer abusive people easy forgiveness and they likely proceeded to cause harm again. That neither benefits the community nor the victim. Nor, justice experts would say, does quick forgiveness benefit the offenders.

But we know, to be candid, that our world today is not always fair or just. When bullies are confronted, sometimes they change, but often they don't change without repeated efforts.

Bible scholars point out that at the heart of today's Gospel is master storytelling, employing shock value to make the point. Definitely not to be taken literally. We know this when we break down the money values suggested. The servant owes the master 10,000 talents. Just one talent is equivalent to 6,000 denarii. Just one of those 6,000 denarii would be equivalent to a day's wages for a person in that time. So, if you do the calculations – the servant owes *60 million denarii* equivalent to the national debt.<sup>1</sup> It is hyperbole, exaggeration to shock us into seeing the contrast; the master forgives that absurd debt owed him by the servant, then that same servant refuses to forgive the debt owed him by another servant – a much more modest debt.

Ok. A reality check - forgiveness is sometimes easy to offer.

I made an error this past weekend that I thought would make my colleague Catherine's life very difficult. I worried about it. We do worry, don't we, when we feel guilty?

Catherine, as it turned out, didn't notice. The harm was minimal. I still made a mistake, I

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey Wests commentary on Matthew 18: 21-35. <http://www.workingpreacher.org>

learned, and Catherine forgave me. A healthy conscience is important - I bet we all have stories!

I bet we also have stories about belligerent, and remorseless people, I call them “offenders”, who never seem to repent. It could be that noisy, ignorant, neighbour. It is common sense to apply the essence of what Jesus teaches; try to deal with the matter person-to-person. If the annoying person doesn’t listen, bring in someone in to help; perhaps someone not so close to the situation to reframe the offending actions so the offender can understand.

If we avoid dealing with offenses within our homes, within our neighbourhoods, consider what happens. The residual effect of major harm can fester. The offender might continue their harmful ways. Acrimony builds within relationships, even in the larger community, and a sense neighbourliness erodes. It becomes much more difficult to love our neighbours then.

Forgiveness is not just a one-time action. It is a process, and it requires that we pay attention to relationships. Restorative Justice people tell us that when an offense happens, there is disruption in relationships. Often many more people are impacted by a crime than just the victim. Healing the hurt takes time, and effort. The one who hurts us, or maybe we are the one doing the hurting, we must take responsibility for the harm we caused for healing to be restored. That is not to mention the complex work of a victim finding healing, and maybe forgiving the offender. Our criminal justice system in Canada, as progressive as it is, still does not do this complex, expensive work well.

I had the opportunity to attend conference where the keynote speaker was Wilma Derksen, whose 13-year-old daughter, Candace, was murdered. The case remained unsolved for 22 years. A man was arrested and sentenced, but in 2017 he had a retrial and was found not guilty. I cannot begin to imagine how the Derksens felt; their 13-year-old daughter missing for 6 and a half weeks. That hits close to the heart for me, thinking about Sophia.

Wilma tells her story that the day Candace’s body was found, a knock came at the door at 10:30 that night. The visitor said, “I’m the parent of a murdered child too.” He told her that she now belonged to an exclusive club that no one wants to belong to. The man proceeded to them that he had lost everything health, relationships, his ability to work.

That night Wilma and her husband Cliff made a decision before going to sleep. They had lost their daughter to a horrific crime, and didn’t want to lose so much more because they might choose to obsess over the murderer who was still loose. I don’t know how they did it, but the Derksens chose a path of forgiveness, not really knowing what would be involved along that journey.

As it turned out, it was a very difficult journey. But it was a journey grounded in Christian faith and hope. Wilma explains that “forgiveness” for her, “is a hard word...an ever present position of the mind ...a promise of what we want to do, a goal, a North Star”.<sup>2</sup>

Forgiveness is a process, a path along which we the ones who are impacted by harm actively make choices, one choice being to do the hard work of seeking healing and

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<sup>2</sup> Wilma Derksen, <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/wilma-derksen/>

hope. That is very challenging work when our culture celebrates vengeance and social media enables us to rant.

The parable Jesus told about the debt forgiven by the master is a shocking tale filled with extremes. The biggest scandal, though, is the word of grace, the absurd initial grace of the master, which should have engendered gratitude in the servant.<sup>3</sup>

We are supposed to feel indignant, hearing how graceless that forgiven servant was towards another who owed him. What a great storyteller – making us first horrified at the injustice, then, a momentary “aha” moment – *the unforgiving one can sometimes be us*.

Last week I used St. Catherine of Siena’s image of two feet of love, a vision she had where Christian love had two feet. One foot is grounded firmly in God’s love; connected deeply with the holy, grounded in God. God’s Love, and gratitude for that love, percolates through our whole being. I think that the blessing for the Derksens was that they felt God’s love and guidance that night as they chose a path to forgiveness.

The other “foot of love” is planted firmly in the real world; seeking justice, caring for, loving, our neighbours. The work of forgiveness is messy, and sometimes very painful. But it is a choice we need to make, time and again, rather than choosing bitterness and revenge. I have learned from lived experience that forgiveness is borne out of a place of humility; recognizing that I have wronged others, and will again.

Confession and forgiveness is woven into Christian worship, for a very good reason. Not to guilt us, but to remind us that following Jesus is to recognize daily that we do make mistakes as human beings. We call it sin, but we believe that our Creator forgives us even as we apologize.

God’s shocking Grace is at the heart of Christian love & forgiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Campbell’s “Homiletical Perspective” on Matthew 18: 21-35 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2