

Mathematics of Faith
A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
March 17, 2024
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

On screen is what is called a Mandala. The artist says this of it: it is a bird's eye view of forgiveness that starts in the centre. See the person in the middle, standing alone, closed off. The movement outwards shows the person being challenged. The next ring out from centre shows people shaking hands, attempting to communicate. In the next concentric ring outward, another person is brought in to help, to listen, to serve as a witness. Finally, in the outermost ring we see people with open arms, arms around each other, connecting.

How does that image sit with you? For me, it sounds more like a formula, at first glance – rather like an icebreaker at a couples retreat, teaching about communication. The cynic in me might say that this could depict a congregation coping with conflict; a facilitator using this mandala to introduce a process for conflict mediation. I can also imagine congregants in that conflict scenario, crossing their arms, rather like that person in the centre.

Like most or all Gospel stories of Jesus that we may hear, I think that we modern folks can somehow relate. Recall a time when we have needed forgiveness, a person we offended or harmed in some way was gracious enough to help us get from the isolation at the centre of the image, to the openness and restoration of the outer ring; maybe we didn't have such a gracious person that we offended, and working through conflict felt tedious; or, perhaps we relate to a time when we were the victim of an offensive action or remark, and maybe it was you or me who was not inclined to help that person to make amends.

Forgiveness is truly a complicated process, and sometimes, truthfully, people cannot get to the point of being able to forgive.

Let's consider again Peter. Peter, it seems, instead of making declarations about what Jesus should and shouldn't do, Peter is now asking questions.¹ Almost as if Peter is hoping for a formula from Jesus: How long we have to put up with that offending person before we are allowed to give up on them. He is probably thinking of the offender at that moment, wondering how much longer the community has to put up with them. How many times, Jesus?

Seventy-seven; that is code for you just keep forgiving, and forgiving. I'm pretty sure that Jesus did not mean, letting that person off the hook. This Gospel story was heavily edited over decades, it feels like a policy being developed when the church was being formed by Paul and Peter, after Jesus was gone. There is little doubt that in Jesus' time, as his movement was building, there were conflicts within that community among: men and women; Jews and Gentiles; well-to-do patrons and less well-to-do peasants.

Forgiving is not defined by any *formula*, or time constraints. It is also very personal. It also does not need to hinge on the other person apologizing, or changing their

¹ The main theme of this sermon thanks to "SANCTIFIED ART WANDERING HEART SERMON PLANNING GUIDE", Dr. Terence Lester and Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. sanctifiedart.org

behaviours. Wouldn't it be nice if we all repented and we could work our way quickly to the outer ring of this mandala. Theologian and clinical psychologist Chanequa Walker-Barnes suggests that forgiveness is largely an internal process, a way of taking our power back and saying, "I have my own feeling that needs to be done."²

Part of that [feeling] is my image of the other person, which is separate from the wrongdoer's process. That's even separate from the relationship. We forgive more to make things right in our heart and mind, rather than needing to reconcile the relationship with one who has harmed us. Forgiveness might restore relationships, but that is not the main focus.

Seeing forgiveness from a formulaic perspective, like a math equation, does not work. My father is an engineer, and so he likes clarity, calculations that have definitive results. In civil engineering, without clear data and results, buildings fall down.

Jesus baffles the analytical mind of Peter with his astounding simplicity in his answer – Seventy-seven.

You always forgive, Dave. You always forgive, Maureen. You always forgive, Scott.

Forgiveness focuses first on reconciling with ourselves; only later is it about restoring a relationship with one who offended us. If they don't apologise, or repent and change their ways, forgive them anyway, and move on. Faith is not a mathematical formula according to Jesus; faith at the heart of forgiveness serves as rich soil within which that unconditional, infinite, love of God germinates and grows and gets shared with the community. Amen.

² "Why Are Christians So Bad At Forgiveness?" an interview with Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, by Mitchell Atencio. SOJOURNERS. October 31, 2023. sojo.net/articles/reconstruct/why-are-christians-so-bad-forgiveness?



Seventy-seven Times by Lauren Wright Pittman. Inspired by Matthew 18:15-22. Digital painting © a sanctified art sanctifiedart.org