

“The Four Things that Matter Most: I Forgive You”  
Matthew 18: 21-35

We know through the teachings of our faith and through scientific evidence that to forgive is to live a healthier life. In his book (screen image of book) *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*, psychologist Fred Luskin writes (screen), “In careful scientific studies, forgiveness training has been shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connection, increase emotional self-confidence.” Yet, forgiveness is not always popular because it is one of the hardest things to do. We feel that if we forgive that we are condoning or forgetting the damage that happened. We feel that if we forgive, we are excusing the one who hurt us. One of the best statements I have heard about why forgiveness is so hard comes from Berne Brown quoting her pastor Rev. Joe Reynolds who said (screen), “In order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die.” We can’t go back to how the relationship was before the hurt. We must make peace with the fact that the person we forgive and reconcile with has the capacity to hurt us again. Here is a list of the things that must die which Berne Brown has discovered in her work on forgiveness (screen):

- The idea that those who love me will never hurt me.
- The idea that I will always be able to avoid hurting others.
- The idea that people who hurt me are always wrong.
- The idea that if they do hurt me, they must not love/like me.
- The idea that anyone who hurts me is against me and is out to get me and must be my enemy.
- The idea that anyone who hurts me is doing it deliberately (it must be personal).

This list shows us some of the reasons why forgiveness can be so difficult, because it requires a lot of change in our thinking and perception of reality. And that is not always easy. I grew up in a part of the world where revenge was enshrined as a high cultural value. The thinking goes something like this: If you kill someone in my family, I will kill someone in your family and then you have to kill someone in my family and then there is no end to bloodshed. I knew firsthand how awful it is to live with that kind of mentality of tit for tat. Wars were fought between families, neighbors, and nations over old grudges and hurts in that part of the world. This awareness makes what Jesus taught about forgiveness in Matthew 18 even more radical for me.

The context of holding grudges for generations helps us see why Peter’s question to Jesus about forgiveness was potent (Read Matthew 18:21-35). Peter had just heard Jesus’ teachings about dealing with conflict in the community of faith, and as usual, you can count on Peter to push the envelope and to ask for clarifications. He tries to put a specific number on how many times we should forgive those who offend or hurt us. Peter asked Jesus if forgiving someone seven times was enough. Seven is a number that represented wholeness, a fullness of a cycle like the story of creation or the Sabbatical year. He was not only being generous, but also radical in his offer. Yet, I

believe that Jesus' response was not about numbers alone. It was about a radical way of life and forgiveness.

First the number "seventy-seven" or seventy times seven is a very precise number. This number is found only one other time in the Bible in (screen) Genesis 4:23-24 and the story of Cain, the murderer, and Lamech. Cain gets revenge seven times and Lamech gets revenge "seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven." When Jesus uses this number, he is addressing this way of revenge and calling for a major change. The story of Lamech symbolizes the cycle of hate, revenge and murder. Jesus breaks that cycle of hate and revenge. The number seven symbolized perfection in Jesus' time. So, this is a call for absolute and perfect forgiveness.

The second radical element of this invitation to forgiveness is the parable Jesus told. We can read the parable and easily miss its shocking nature which Jesus intended in order to reverse the people's understanding of forgiveness. The parable is shocking because the king would have been the symbol of corruption and power in Jesus' time. Also, we have here the unjust system of slavery when people couldn't pay their debts, they became slaves. And the amount of money that the slave owed to the king was so tremendous. (Screen) A single talent is equivalent to 15 years of wages. 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of 150,000 year of labor, while the amount that the servant was owed by his friend was only 100 denarii which equaled 100 days' wages. So, to see this kind of forgiveness coming from a king must have shocked the listeners. The contrast between the two debts was so sharp to help people really get the message. Not only the amount was so incredible, but also the person who forgave was not a person who normally would forgive others their financial debts. These people were his slaves. He owned them because they couldn't pay their debts. So, by forgiving the debt, the king was basically setting the slave free. The king must have been crazy. The listeners would have thought, "A king would never do such a thing!" They would have been shocked to even imagine such forgiveness. Jesus here is shocking his listeners with the use of this image to show them that God's forgiveness was limitless, even absurd, and their image of a vengeful God was to be transformed. Jesus was telling them that if even a corrupt king could be so forgiving, then how much more did they need to be! That is the shock of the values of the kingdom of God. They turn our "normal" expectations upside down. Yet, even as we listen today to the teachings of Jesus, we have a hard time truly believing or practicing them. But forgiveness is always possible even when people may seem like enemies. Here is a clip from a documentary called "Unlikely Friends" about the possibility of of forgiveness despite horrible hurts and crimes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CiuKo-Pnok>

Forgiveness is ultimately about us allowing God's love to heal our past hurts and pain. It is about letting go of the emotional baggage of the past. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu wrote a great book last year called, *The Book of Forgiving*. Both are no strangers to conflict or deep hurts. He was the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and they both knew firsthand the struggles of

apartheid in South Africa. But both have come to realize the importance of the practice of forgiveness for God's vision of peace and justice to become a reality in our world. Here is a short but powerful quote from it, "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us... Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, they will hold the keys to our happiness, they will be our jailor." In this book, they offer us a fourfold process of forgiveness. This is important because forgiveness is a process and not just something that we can take lightly, especially when the feelings are deep. Here is the process (screen):

1. Tell the Story: When we tell the story, we tell the facts of what happened to us to someone who is empathetic and safe. We may need to tell the story many times before we are ready to let it go.
2. Name the Hurt: Naming the hurt means to say what specifically happened to us emotionally. It means owning our emotional reactions and the way we have ached, felt confused, or whatever it was we felt. No feeling is wrong.
3. Grant Forgiveness: Forgiveness is a choice. Forgiving is how we moved from victim to hero in our story. We know we are healing when we are able to tell a new story. Granting forgiveness means to get to the place where we see the perpetrator's "shared humanity." We can forgive when we can see the other person's pain and confusion and release any need for retribution.
4. Renew or Release the Relationship: This means to either let the person go if needs be (for safety or another compelling reason), or ideally, to renew the relationship. Renewing the relationship can be making a new relationship out of the old one, perhaps re-defining the roles and boundaries.

There is a story about the power of forgiveness that comes from the pain of September 11, 2001. It is about a pastor whose church (St. Paul's) was close to Ground Zero. His name is Lyndon Harris and he suffered deeply before finally getting to the point of forgiveness. Here is a video of some of the story: <https://youtu.be/6FOhEVOvnuC>.

(Second Service) Here is the story from the Christian Science Monitor (July 27, 2009): Forgiveness didn't mean much to the Rev. Lyndon Harris on Sept. 11, 2001. He was too busy helping rescuers at the World Trade Center towers. He couldn't have known that one day he, too, would require rescue from his own ground zero.

After the twin towers fell, Father Harris spent the morning evacuating children from the nursery school at Trinity Church Wall Street – two blocks from the crash site. As he prayed and worked, he had no idea how dramatically his life would change. All the children and their parents working nearby survived. For Harris the day went by in a blur. He spent most of it on the street, helping. The next morning, still dazed, he arrived at little St. Paul's Chapel, just up the street from Trinity. Ashes covered the cemetery out back, but the 200-year-old sanctuary where George Washington once worshiped was intact. As the newly appointed priest in charge of St. Paul's, Harris made a decision. With his superiors at Trinity out of town, he spontaneously opened the chapel to the hundreds of workers at ground zero. For eight months, St. Paul's became a refuge to firefighters, workers, heavy-equipment operators, and police officers.

Open 24 hours a day, St. Paul's served more than a half million meals. Counselors, musicians, and an untold number of volunteers from around the world helped...Once emergency operations ceased, St. Paul's closed for inspection, and Harris faced the realities of life in a hierarchical organization. 'The heights of joy I was blessed to share while serving others at St. Paul's Chapel were soon matched by the depths of my despair,' he recalls. 'Internal divisions concerning the direction of the ministries at St. Paul's boiled over. I wound up resigning.' Over the next three years, Harris's life spiraled down. His lungs had been compromised by exposure to the air at ground zero. He lost his house through foreclosure, and his marriage ended in divorce. 'PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and depression began taking over my life. I was bitter and resentful,' he says. At one point, a good friend listened to Harris's woes. But rather than commiserating, he threw down a challenge: What if you could forgive? Harris hung up the phone. But then he got to thinking: 'Of course I had to forgive! he says. 'I'm a Christian pastor! It's part of my job description.' He called his friend back and told him he'd give it a try. That decision marked a turning point...Out of the ashes of his despair, forgiveness began to bloom. He spent two years as a consultant to The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine (Episcopal) in New York City. As his health returned, he traveled to Beirut, Lebanon, to visit Alexandra Asseily. She had begun a movement to plant a Garden of Forgiveness in her beloved Lebanon after its civil war, which claimed more than 300,000 lives. The greatest gift to one's children, Ms. Asseily teaches, is to become a better ancestor. And that, she says, is done through forgiveness. When he returned from Beirut, Harris joined with Dr. Fred Luskin of the Stanford Forgiveness Project to found their own nonprofit group: The Gardens of Forgiveness project...Harris and Dr. Luskin also developed a forgiveness curriculum for middle-school students...The Gardens of Forgiveness project has planted gardens throughout New York State and in Chicago. The project also has partners in Durban and Soweto, South Africa; Uganda; and Liberia that are exploring planting Gardens of Forgiveness. Harris also dreams of a garden at ground zero in New York City one day, and one at Gettysburg, Pa., to help heal wounds that linger from the Civil War...He sees that by creating a garden you can stroll through and experience with all your senses, you can make a path that leads toward forgiveness, toward transformation and a state of grace."

What is one thing that you will take home with you from this? Turn to your neighbors and share with them and pray to make a commitment to it. Amen.