

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 6, 2026
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Don't get me started on forgiveness. If any text in the Bible gets me fired up, it's this week's lectionary.

It's not that I am *not* a fan of forgiveness...I am. It's just that I think we have lost sight of what the heart of forgiveness is all about. And so this morning, let's do some remedial work on one of the central teachings of our faith.

But, I am going to start with a warning. We are going to challenge some of our long-held beliefs about what forgiveness requires of us. To do that, let's start by naming some of those long-held beliefs.

When I think of my earliest lessons on forgiveness they usually revolve around the action that was required of me when someone did me wrong. I was told to turn the other cheek, to forgive 70 x 7 times. I was told it was my Christian obligation and duty to forgive others because Christ had forgiven me. As one clergy person stated in a sermon on forgiveness...*we don't have to like it, but we do have to do it.*

Now...did you notice what all of those lessons have in common? They all place the weight and responsibility of forgiveness on my shoulders, and on my shoulders alone...no matter the situation. The heavy lifting was taught as an individual act of mercy and grace. It was often also emphasized that once I did the work of forgiveness I would feel better, a weight would be lifted, it would be good for my own heart. Maybe you have been taught similar lessons.

Before I go any further, let me disclose that the topic of forgiveness is very hard for me. Because I come from an abusive family system. Belittled in my home when I was young for never being good enough. Called names that are too ugly to repeat in church. Threatened and thrown out of the family if I spoke up about what was happening. And what I heard more times than I can count is this...*"Emily, why can't you just forgive and forget? Emily, you need to fix this problem."* And everyone in my family fell in line with that faulty faith-based reasoning to turn the other cheek over and over again as my Christian duty.

And here's the problem...nowhere, at no time, did anyone ever talk about the other side of the equation. About what was expected of the person who did the harm, the person whom I was supposed to forgive. Somehow they kept getting a pass without the expectation of confession or repentance or reconciliation.

Maybe you know these kinds of lessons. Maybe you have experienced them. Maybe you have struggled when you didn't want to do one more act of forgiveness. When it felt too vulnerable and unsafe. So...it makes me wonder what does forgiveness look like when violence and hate and abuse continue?

Here is where I want us to do some remedial work. Because the Gospel lesson actually teaches a much richer and more dynamic process of forgiveness than those old clichés...especially in regards to circumstances where harm is repeated. It's a lesson that I think will provide a great deal of healing for many of us.

I want you to notice in our Gospel that Jesus doesn't place the act of forgiveness solely on one person alone. Instead, Jesus teaches that the person who was wronged is just one piece of a much larger process of forgiveness. A process that upholds the safety and security of the person who was harmed while creating a healthier space for the wider community to engage in transformative action.

Why is this important? It's important because all too often forgiveness has been misused as a tool for overlooking wrong-doing. As though we can look away from sin simply because we have forgiven the harm that was done. We can forgo accountability for a faith-based justification of grace.

Maybe you remember my sermon last week on Ubuntu, the *I am because we are* principle taught by Bishop Desmond Tutu. His daughter, Anglican priest and activist, Mpho Tutu van Furth expanded the teaching to say that...

*The faulty singular approach to forgiveness..."asks victims to pick up an eraser and walk through the past eradicating the injuries so that perpetrators...can be released from the guilt for their cruelty and their greed, their prejudice and violence, while preserving the benefits that their behaviour has bestowed on them...."*¹

I even read a sermon recently that highlighted this very point. The priest made the statement that if you are wronged or hurt then you are the one who needs to take the initiative for forgiveness and reconciliation...even if it seems unfair. He went on to say that Jesus' teaching never seems fair and that Jesus requires that we do more than we think we should.

Now...let me state clearly...this teaching isn't completely wrong. Yes, we are supposed to forgive. But what the priest missed entirely, what too many clergy miss entirely in this conversation, is the fact that going back into a harmful situation can be not only unsafe but also unrealistic. Putting sole responsibility on the victim without helping the community create wider accountability only serves to uphold harmful systems of abuse.

Jesus understood this.

Matthew outlines it very clearly. Jesus says that an individual should offer forgiveness but if harm continues or the offer for reconciliation is ignored or devalued then more people are required to get involved. First, you are to gather a few trusted individuals to help. Then, if the behavior continues you gather your wider faith community. Richard Rohr said it well..."*The*

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/i-ask-for-peace-2022-09-14/>

longer [the wrong-doer persists] in not asking for forgiveness, the harder it becomes because we have more and more years of illusion to justify.”²

In other words, the community-based approach insures that issues are faced directly, in a timely manner with compassion and openness to reconciliation so that harmful actions are not perpetuated.

Jesus was teaching a deeply engaged, community-oriented practice of forgiveness that leaned heavily on group accountability and transformation. Therefore, the circle of accountability protects the person who was hurt. And it ensures that they have support to heal. Not to mention that it plants the seeds for a more loving community for everyone involved.

Jesus taught that forgiveness holds an expectation of change and that change is to be structured with safeguards so that harm is not perpetuated. It requires heartfelt confession and the desire for redemption and reconciliation. Not another turned cheek but a process of committed love and renewal by a community of caring people.

So no...forgiveness was never meant to be an individual endeavor placed solely upon the shoulders of the person harmed. And...forgiveness was never meant to be an excuse for harm to continue.

Romans says it so beautifully. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. And if we love one another, we are to ensure that everyone is safe and cared for. That wrongdoing is called out for what it is and that together we work to amend what is harmful. We are to expect repentance and transformation. And, we are to hope for reconciliation.

That is the true heart of forgiveness.

² <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-change-of-consciousness-2022-09-13/>