

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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*Messy Business*

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*Let Us Pray . . .*

Like each of you, I too have had wrongs done to me across my life. It's part of our walk as humans. Some wrongs, I have made peace with. Forgiven. Others? Well they have a hold on me like a leech. I can still feel some of my resentments within easy reach.

Also along my way through life, I have done cringe-worthy regrettable things and have had to forgive myself. It's often not easy and I am still working on some of my stuff — it's a process and likely you can relate.

That we will be hurt and cause hurt is part of being human — I feel certain that is why forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity. It is our imposed difficulties and complexities tangled up in our “trespasses” to which Jesus cuts to the chase in our lesson this morning.

The verses Joan read are from Matthew's chapter instructing the early believers on how to live in community as they scramble to restructure Judaism in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. These verses are part of a larger scope of teachings on conflict resolution which essentially says:

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and work it out.

If that doesn't work, get some witnesses and try again.

If that fails, tell the church - the body of believers.

If that fails, start over!

There is an absence of “turning the other cheek” with instead, as scholars point out, Matthew’s Jesus teaching confrontation, negotiation, and adjudication —

With the end game being forgiveness.

Verses 19 and 20 guide and assure us that we are not left on our own across this process:

*When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action.*

*And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.*

And those verses set us up for this morning’s lesson.

In the story, Peter wants to know the answer to how many times he should forgive his brothers and sisters. “Brothers and sisters” is a reference to fellow believers. You may have caught Peter’s question in

the reading. It isn't *should* he forgive, it's *how often* should he forgive.

That forgiveness is a given is understood to this community.

But what Peter wants to know is the amount of forgiveness. Who is it extended to? So he asks something I would have asked Jesus, "Should I forgive as many as seven times?" As if emphasizing with *as many as seven times* could somehow influence Jesus' response. Peter wants forgiveness easy and wrapped up in countable act. Wants forgiveness to have a foreseeable and doable end and what to know what its limits are. Peter's happy to forgive fellow believers. But what about Gentiles and tax collectors? Where are the lines? Peter's question is understandable because when it comes to forgiveness, it's messy business.

But what scholars teach us is that Jesus' response of seventy times seven means *always*, meaning that forgiveness is for everybody. So how often should we forgive? Matthew's Jesus teaches us *always — for everybody*. To paint a picture of his point, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is like the king who wished to settle his accounts with his slaves. In the story, God is the king and the slave represents the rest of us.

In God's constant call for repentance and reconciliation, in other words in God's faithfulness to the covenant of eternal love, this story is kind of like God's way of saying: Let me show you how it's done. I forgave you a debt that you never stood a chance of repaying anyway — so in return, I want you to go and do likewise.

In the story, the king is moved by the slave's pleas for mercy — not the promise to return what belonged to the King, but his plea. The slave's sincere engagement is what moves the King to act from his compassion and wipe out the debt. Swish. It's gone. The point being that when asked for from God, forgiveness is given. Swish. It's gone.

Forgiveness works through the very act of naming. Within verse 32 is where we hear God's movement *I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me*. So the first thing to note is that in asking for forgiveness, first plead with God — in other words, engage God in all sincerity when asking for forgiveness and Swish. It's gone. It's over. Just

like that. There must be something about the owning up, the admitting and the naming where the mysteries of grace and mercy dwell.

It's beyond my understanding, but I accept this mysterious gift.

The Greek word for forgive is (af-ee'-ay-mee) *aphiemi*, which means:

To send away,

To leave alone,

To permit to depart,

To forgive.

If you are presently carrying any unforgiveness within you — either against another or yourself, and if you were able to forgive, what would you be sending away, leaving alone, or permitting to depart?

To imagine these things, perhaps you first have to name how *not* forgiving keeps you bound. When I have held onto things that God asks

us to let go of, I find that my mind is noisy and my body tightens in places. My lack of forgiveness keeps me stuck. I find an uncomfortable restlessness within me and too much time fantasizing about how I should handle things. But here's the thing: God is telling us through the story that God has already handled things. Our job is to give it to God. Correctly assuming that we will not typically go and do likewise, the story tells of the consequences for not extending the same mercy as God models. When we do not forgive in the same way that we have been forgiven, we will be tortured: Hear it in verse **34**

*And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*

Beloveds, what this means is that when we don't forgive, or don't send the hurt away, when we don't leave the wrong alone, or permit it to depart — it means we are holding onto pain, grudges, and resentments or holding these things over someone else's head — and in doing so, aren't we handing ourselves over to be tortured as well? How long have

you suffered with anger or a grudge or a deep hurt because of holding onto something someone has done to you? Or you have done to another?

Confession — sharing with God the contents of your heart — is much like a lament. These heartfelt things force us to be honest with God and as one blogger wrote, confession ensures we're not deluding ourselves about the state of our hearts.

In Jesus' story, the one who was forgiven did not want to forgive in turn — and compared to what the king did for him, it would have been nothing for the slave to forgive what meagerness was owed him. But he didn't do it —

That's when we hear the heaviness of the story — forgive as you have been forgiven or else you'll be tortured.

As I said earlier, our holding onto hurts can be torturous.

Jesus' teaches us that if God can forgive us when we bring our miserable, broken, and sinful selves before God — and Lord knows, I've brought my own mighty deep wrongs before God — then God expects us to offer the same to another.

I have also often wondered if seventy times seven is perhaps another way of also saying that while forgiveness is for everyone, it is also on-going work. It is something we do over and over again — because Jesus understands that our separation from God — our sinning — also happens over and over again.

As with most things Scriptural, it seems easier said than done. One of the most common lament I hear is related to an inability to feel like forgiveness is not possible. “How do I forgive?” is a common question.

If practicing what Jesus taught — simply forgiving — feels impossible, consider Blake Coffee's thoughts. Coffee of Christian Unity Ministries, urges Christians to think of forgiveness as a promise — whereby

forgiveness is not something we wait to do, it is a *commitment* we make right up front, just as soon as the pain has occurred. Why? Because God has first forgiven us. And that's how God works.

Coffee writes that most of us wait to forgive until we *feel* like we can do it, or are ready to do it, but the way the Bible describes forgiveness, it's not a feeling at all, for if we waited until we *felt* like we could forgive, it often would never happen.

And it is hard to do. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it. Coffee reminds us that the very act of forgiveness tends to separate Christ's church from the rest of the world. It is a distinguishing characteristic of Christ's followers. We have been forgiven much, so we forgive.

Forgiveness can be a powerful way to let go of the hold the offense has on your deepest self. While Scripture tells us it's easy, our lived realities tell us it's hard. We can't always do it — even though we are taught that

we are to do so. I think it might help to remember that forgiveness is ultimately between each of you and God.

In very difficult situations, think about this reflection on forgiveness from Frederick Keene in his article *Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament* where Keene writes, “[The Crucifixion] is a situation where Jesus has no power; he is speaking from a cross about those who have crucified him. What is noticeable is that he does not forgive them.

Instead, while within the shadow of death, Jesus says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Having no power within the situation, he cannot forgive... This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not.”

Think about that. If you the weak one at the mercy of another, then give it to God. Beloveds, ultimately this means forgiveness is an act of faith between each one of us and God. In a transactional world that loves to keep score, this act of mercy and grace of God’s is absolutely baffling.

So as you move through this new week, my prayer for you is that you keep forgiving where you can. And when it feels impossible, ask God to do the heavy lifting.

Forgiveness isn't about a feeling, it's about a promise — lest we forget that on the same night that Judas will betray Jesus and Peter will deny him and the other disciples will abandon him, Jesus announces to all anyway — while lifting up the cup, “This is my blood of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins, which is poured out for the many. Always.”

*Amen*