

*Confession and Pardon*  
Third in a Series about Worship  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Readings: Matthew 18:21-35  
Psalm 130

September 21, 2014

When I was a young pastor, I realized early on that the academic stuff I learned in seminary was helpful to my preaching and teaching, but the best teachers for the daily business of leading a church were the lay leaders of the congregation. One of my early mentors was Nancy Travis.

I admired her greatly. Nancy had founded the Georgia Chapter of Save the Children and was an impassioned advocate. When he was Governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter tapped Nancy to be a state-wide

advisor on issues related to children, and when he became President of the United States, Nancy Traivs became one of his international child welfare ambassadors; she helped establish childcare centers and programs for impoverished children all over the world, particularly in Egypt and the Middle East.

Somehow Nancy also managed to do a lot of church work too; she was an Elder and chaired the Community Outreach Committee of Session; she volunteered in a shelter for homeless families our church founded and helped run; and she supported me with all manner of wisdom as I learned the ropes of leading that vibrant, mission-oriented congregation. Nancy worked into her early 70's and if anyone deserved a leisurely season of winding down, she did. But within a few months of her retirement, she showed up at worship looking a little jaundiced and shortly thereafter was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The conversations I had so enjoyed with her at the church, all too soon, became visits to her home in hospice care.

On my first visit to her home, I entered the side door off the driveway into her kitchen, and was surprised to discover that Nancy had cut out and affixed to her refrigerator door numerous Prayers of Confession from our worship bulletin. In my mind, this remarkable woman was a living saint who worked tirelessly for poor children across the world, and yet, here as daily reminders were a couple dozen Prayers of Confession.

Of course, I asked her about it. "Agnes," she said, "A long time ago, I realized that the weekly confession of sin gives me a chance to be a better person. I don't live with a lot of regret; but I always want to be a better person tomorrow than I was yesterday. The corporate Confession of Sin and God's Assurance of Pardon give all of us hope for a brighter future."<sup>1</sup> In her work with Save the Children, I am sure that

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<sup>1</sup> More information about Nancy Travis' legacy of child advocacy can be found at [nancytravis.org](http://nancytravis.org) of the Nancy Travis Childcare Project.

Nancy Travis saw the worst that the world can dish up for an impoverished child. But she had this sense, obviously, of oneness with all other human beings that we fall short, and stand in need of God's forgiveness – over and over again.

We know the deep need to experience forgiveness, and we know how difficult it can be to forgive. While it is essential to all relationships, it is also something that often seems to elude us: to accept forgiveness, and to forgive those who have wronged us. All of us can recount scenarios when minute details of a harmful interaction are easily recalled and forgiveness has seemed beyond our grasp: a word spoken in haste, never to be taken back; being the victim of abuse, or a crime, or neglect; watching a relationship crumble under the stress of wrongs committed. No matter our age or circumstance, each one of us knows the difficulty we have with forgiveness.

And yet, our scripture says that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven by God, and the story that goes along with this teaching is as direct as it gets. Parables like this one, as you know, are stories exaggerated to make a point. Since forgiveness is among the hardest of Christian disciplines, Jesus paints this story in bold colors and broad strokes just to make sure we understand.

Peter, God bless him, is once again positioning himself as Teacher's Pet, asking a question just in order to give the right answer. He says, "Lord, if a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as *seven* times?" Peter is showing off, because Jewish Law holds that you only have to forgive someone three times. So Peter's suggestion of *seven*, might indicate he is catching on to this Jesus idea about living generously. But Jesus must have astounded Peter, and all the others listening that day. "No, Peter, you are not even close. The answer is much greater than seven."

Now, if any of you struggle with math, you are in good company with your friends in the Bible. Not everyone understood this equation

because some ancient manuscripts record that Jesus said 77 times and others wrote down seventy *times* seven, which would be *four hundred ninety* times.<sup>2</sup> However you work out the equation, Jesus makes this amply clear: there is no exact, limited number to count. An extravagant measure of forgiveness is expected as the parable shows.

The “king” in the story stands for God and the various “debtors” are sinners with their sins. The king has absolute control to dispense either justice or mercy. One of his servants owed him a huge sum of money. The debt of ten thousand talents is no small sum; it’s the equivalent of one hundred fifty years of wages for your average worker back then. There is no circumstance under which this amount could be repaid; therefore the king’s decision to forgive the debtor is an act of extravagant forgiveness.

However, the forgiven one, when the occasion arises, does not act likewise to extend forgiveness. When his servant owed him, by comparison, a modest sum of three month’s wages, he dealt with him harshly. The king gets wind of it, in his fury revokes his gracious act, and throws the man he had forgiven into prison. “So my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you,” says Jesus, “if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Clear as this parable may be, it does not take the sting out of the lesson. *We are to forgive as God forgives us?* No way! It is not humanly possible. And that, in essence, is Jesus’ point. Only when we receive and experience the forgiveness God gives us as an act of pure, undeserved grace, can we extend that forgiveness to others. That’s why we pray for God’s help over and over again: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...” We need God’s help, because forgiveness is so hard and it can take a very long time.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*.

According to psychologists, forgiveness is best understood as a complex spiritual, emotional, relational and cognitive process. In order to grasp that complexity, it is important to consider what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not simply accepting, condoning, excusing, denying, or even forgetting. There is no help in thinking we are called to “forgive and forget.” Generally, we do not forget.

Rather, forgiveness asks for vigorous remembering. A theologian and psychologist, who paired up to study forgiveness have said: “Forgiveness involves surveying the damage one incurred through the harmful action of another, and eventually remembering it differently rather than trying to erase it from memory. It is choosing to give up resentment and retaliation. Forgiveness is an act of mercy that creates space for living anew with a past one would rather forget.”<sup>3</sup> God does that for us all the time; God wants us to act that way toward others.

Our weekly, corporate Confession of Sin is not about just having the slate wiped clean in order to do it all over again. It’s about remembering yesterday and then by God’s gracious forgiveness, being newly created for today and tomorrow. Forgiveness is a powerful rejection of the strong claim of sin upon our lives, as we are washed clean in the waters of baptism.

Award winning journalist and author, Wendy Murray, has recently written an article about interviewing Fred Rogers some years ago. What most people didn’t realize about Mister Rogers and his Neighborhood is that behind the puppets, the sweaters, and the simple songs he sang for children was an abiding faith and weighty theology.

The Presbyterian Church ordained Fred Rogers as “an evangelist to work with children and families through the mass media.” He did not bring evangelism in its churchy sense to this calling, nor did he name

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<sup>3</sup> LeRon Shults and Steven Sandage, quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Aug-Sept, 2008, p. 59.

religious themes in his programs. But his daily neighborhood visits with children would sow seeds to awaken something elemental in their hearts.

He too had remarkable mentors for his unique ministry. Wendy Murray was privileged to conduct the last interview of Fred Rogers before he died 12 years ago. He told her a story about his relationship with his systematic theology professor at Pittsburgh Seminary, Dr. William S. Orr. He said “I took every class he offered. He was a great influence on many of our lives. Not just because he was brilliant. He was the kind of person who would go out on a winter’s day for lunch and come back without his overcoat, having given it away.”

“When Dr. Orr was long retired,” Fred Rogers said, “Every Sunday my wife and I used to go to the nursing home to visit him. One Sunday we had just sung *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* and I was full of that one verse. I said, ‘Dr. Orr, we just sang this hymn and I’ve got to ask you about part of it. You know where it says: *The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. For, lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.* What is the one little word that will fell the prince of darkness? That one word Martin Luther claimed would strike down evil?’ After a quiet moment, Dr. Orr answered ‘Forgive. The word is *forgive*. Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of forgiveness.’ He went on, ‘When you look with accusing eyes at your neighbor, that is what evil would want, because the more the Accuser (which is the word for Satan in Hebrew) the more the Accuser can spread the accusing spirit, the greater evil spreads.’ Dr. Orr said, ‘On the other hand, if you can look with the eyes of the Advocate on your neighbor, those are the eyes of Jesus.’”<sup>4</sup>

Studies show that when people come to forgive someone of great wrongdoing, there is a physical sense of relief, a feeling of having put down a burden. That is what Jesus wants for each one of us. Jesus says,

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Murray, “Remembering Mr. Rogers and the Light He Left,” [patheos.com](http://patheos.com), Feb. 27, 2014.

“I have laid down my life for you, your sins are forgiven.” That counts for more wages than we can ever repay. All we are asked to do in response is to extend some measure of that same God-given gift to others.

Forgive. It is one little word, but through Christ it is the word above all earthly powers.

AMEN.