

Defining Words of Faith 5: *Forgiveness*

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Colossians 3:12-17

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Matthew 18:18-22

¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church* sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²²Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven* times.'

When I was a young minister, I was privileged to be both pastor to and mentored by one of the giants of our Presbyterian denomination. The Reverend Dr. Albert Curry Winn was a brave and prophetic leader during the Civil Rights Movement. He was a theologian with a keen intellect, and he had a tender, compassionate presence about him. After his death at the age of 90, he was described by a friend as “a quiet room in a noisy world.” In downtown Atlanta, we worked together at Central Presbyterian where I was Associate Pastor for Community Ministry, where he served for a time as the interim preacher and volunteered to wash the feet of the homeless in our church Night Shelter every Wednesday night at the Foot Clinic. At the North Decatur church while I was pregnant with our first child, I invited Al to preach during my maternity leave. With kind humility, he said: “You know I’ve been pastor of churches large and small; I’ve taught at Princeton and Union seminaries, I’ve been professor at Davidson and Stillman Colleges, the President of Louisville Seminary, and the Moderator of the denomination, but I have never been asked to preach a maternity leave; I’d love to.” He and Grace welcomed my pastoral care, and he was a gracious advisor as I learned how to be a leader of a vibrant urban congregation.

I asked Al Winn one time to tell me how he organized his preaching themes over time, how he found a rhythm for preaching prophetic sermons that call for action, and more pastoral sermons – the kind that make your heart sing, intended to deepen faith and hope. Al tipped his head back, thought for a moment, and said, “Agnes, you’ll find your own rhythm arising from the life of this congregation, but it’s been my practice to preach a hard prophetic sermon, then preach about forgiveness; next you find a passage on something like hope, then you preach about forgiveness, you talk about the challenge of following Jesus in justice, then you preach about forgiveness. Agnes, you can never preach too many sermons on forgiveness, he said. Needing to feel forgiven and yearning to find in our hearts a way to forgive another is the ongoing existential reality of most everybody and perhaps the hardest challenge of living the Christian faith.”

Jesus is on his way to betrayal and death and this section of Matthew's gospel feels like important last-minute lessons. Jesus has instructed his disciples not to put stumbling blocks in front of would-be believers; how to work out their differences by listening to one another; and how to lead with humility. So in this series of teaching moments the most earnest of disciples, Peter throws out a hasty and urgent question: *Teacher, If another member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive?* Now, this was not a new subject; the disciples were no strangers to the matter of forgiveness. Not only had Jesus previously instructed them in the Lord's Prayer about asking forgiveness; the topic was found everywhere in their scriptures.

Biblical Scholar and archaeologist David Noel Freedman was one of the first Americans given access to work with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Freedman grew up in the Jewish tradition and became a Christian with one foot firmly planted in Judaism and the other in Christianity. In his later years, he was asked if he could sum up all that he had learned from a lifetime immersed in scripture in a sentence, he said, "There is forgiveness."¹

Peter knew that the sacred texts had a tradition of recommending to forgive three times as enough! So when Peter says to Jesus, "Should I forgive seven times?" he knows that he has more than doubled the Jewish practice of pardoning someone for an offense. To this extraordinary gesture, however, Jesus replies, not seven, but seventy-seven. Some translations say seventy times seven. Peter's is an honest and practical kind of query. We understand his inclination to be able to keep score and judge where he is on the mercy scale. But Jesus basically says to Peter, "There is no limit." Seventy-seven is a metaphor for infinity. It is code for "Don't keep score." Seventy-seven is a way of reminding Peter and us: Forgive as you have been forgiven and you likely don't want to calculate that amount. You cannot count how many times God has forgiven you. The God who forgives, is the God who

¹ Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, p. 98.

calls us into the church and refuses to free us from the obligation to be in community with one another. As the Psalmist says, “The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”

Theologian Al Winn said that our need to attend to the matter of forgiveness is inexhaustible. Biblical scholar David Freedman condensed the great story of scripture into a declaration that from Genesis to Revelation, the first and last word is forgiveness. But I suspect that for most of us, the question of forgiveness is not so academic or theoretical even if it is deeply theological. We have known the burning hole in the gut after we have been violated and hurt. We have lived the ache of resentment. The sleepless night. The vengeful daydream. I will admit that forgiveness is not always my strong suit because I have a good memory and I can count pretty well. But I also know that the act of forgiveness has a kind of simultaneous outward and inward movement towards healing.

When he was spearheading the Truth and Reconciliation trials to help South Africa heal from its long season of apartheid and racial oppression, Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said, “There is no future without forgiveness.” Tutu and his daughter Mpho (UM- phO) co-authored *The Book of Forgiving: the Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. They write, “Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again.” By breaking down the process of forgiveness into four parts, they offer a practical pathway forward saying, Forgiveness is the way we heal the world by: Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship. “Until we can forgive,” they write, “we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility to be at peace. Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the

person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped.”²

As a matter of fact, research on forgiveness has shown that forgiving transforms people mentally, emotionally, spiritually and even physically. Psychologist Fred Luskin writes, “In careful scientific studies, forgiveness training has shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connection, and increase emotional self-confidence... People who are more forgiving report fewer health and mental problems and fewer symptoms of stress; and there are corrosive effects on not forgiving. Hanging onto anger and resentment increases stress and can damage the heart as well as the soul.”³

Good God, no wonder Jesus urges us to practice forgiveness freely! Forgiveness not only releases the offender who is guilty of inflicting hurt; it releases us from being bound by bitterness and anger so that we may be free to be gracious, merciful and yes, more faithful to our calling as children of God. Some wrongs may be impossible to forget; And some of us will forever bear the scars of those who have wronged us; but all of us can participate in the healing act of forgiving one another, for their sake, for our sake, and to heal what is broken in the world.

A friend of mine, Alex Evans, was pastor of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church when the mass shooting took place at Virginia Tech fifteen years ago. He became one of a team to provide support to the first responders who had the gruesome job of going onto a college campus to find the dead and injured and study the crime scene. While he has served congregations as pastor, he has continued to use his unique experience

² Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, p. 4-17.

³ Tutu again, p. 17

as a chaplain to police officers who – in the line of duty – are called to critical incidents – shootings, other violent crimes, terrible car accidents. He has also trained others to help and support first responders to be engaged in, as he puts it, “a big sea of complex thoughts and feelings, emotions and actions related to life and death, revenge and forgiveness.” He tells the story of a police officer whose partner and friend was killed in the line of duty. The man who killed him was on the loose, which is one of the most motivating and maddening things for any police department. Tremendous grief and loss for a fellow officer gets mingled with fear and anger as a search unfolds, all of which can put effective work in jeopardy, and we all know how devastating and unjust that outcome can be.

The partner of the officer who was killed in this incident describes his own emotional turmoil this way: “I was riding around filled with hatred. This criminal had killed one of my best friends. It was going to feel so good to find him. I was ready. I was focused. I had a mission. But as the hours passed, I realized how I was getting caught up in the rage and loss. I realized I was becoming, in my thinking and feelings, all that the killer was. I was becoming a hateful, murderous person. Then I realized, that is not who I am. I have to be different. I am more than that. I cannot be pulled into that death-filled, hate-filled kind of existence. I have to struggle to forgive this guy, and then be the trained officer I am whose duty is to protect and to serve.”⁴ In that case, the culprit was caught, not killed by police, but taken up into the courts and given due process. But that officer’s internal struggle resonates with our struggles with forgiveness.

Most of us are not dealing with murder, but we understand what it is like to find ourselves swimming in a big sea of complex thoughts and feelings, emotions and actions; we may dream about revenge or the perfect arrow to pull out of our quiver that is made of the exact words to pierce another. All of us struggle with forgiveness. But remember

⁴ Alex Evans, “Forgiving from your Heart,” 9/14/14, day1.org.

that old saying about anger and hatred? To nurture our anger and hatred is like drinking poison hoping that it is going to kill the other person. And yet all it does is kill something inside of us and separates us from God's intentions for our lives.

While we most often cannot forget the injury that comes our way, and while we can bear terrible losses, wounds and scars, we are called to forgive. Seventy-seven times; Jesus says: even Seventy times seven. Here's the gospel promise: through the act of forgiveness, as hard as it can be, we ourselves will be healed; we will be free.

AMEN.