

Sermon September 10, 2023
[Matthew 18:15-20]

On Forgiveness
Pastor John Michael Barich

Driven by love, Jesus teaches and exemplifies a relentlessness for reconciliation, as he opens up a conversation with the disciples about forgiveness.

Now, I don't know about you, Pastor Peterson, but I sure would have liked to have at least one course on "forgiveness" in seminary, even if it's just two credits! It's even in all of our Lutheran constitutions somewhere, this chapter, Matthew 18, that "we will live according to these words of Jesus," but offering and receiving forgiveness is incredibly challenging for us. And, we've made up "things" and behaviors along the way that make it even more confusing.

So, maybe it would be helpful if I tried to be incredibly clear about what forgiveness is *not*. It is not condoning; forgetting; excusing; being tolerant of disrespect; minimizing your hurt; denying or suppressing anger; ignoring accountability, or justice.

Forgiveness is not a free pass. It's not saying what happened was okay. Forgiveness is not contingent upon any of these things; these things are completely independent of the call of forgiveness.

And, in this Gospel, Jesus wants to release us from the "what-should-haves," and the "what-could-haves," and bring us back into the reality of the present moment, and just "be" with what's in front of us.

And if we take forgiveness a step further, it also invites us to look ahead and ask, "Even though this happened, how do I want the future to unfold from this point forward?"

The forgiveness Jesus is talking about is a forgiveness that calls for *radical acceptance of whatever happened in the past* – even if we don't like it, or condone it – recognizing the present moment for what it really is, and, realizing the responsibility *we* play in whatever unfolds next.

I'm sorry to say it's taken me almost 60 years to come to know that we can't control what happened in the past. But we *can* choose how to continue on into the future. And every time we offer and receive forgiveness, we open a door to new possibilities – a door that remains locked if we choose to hold onto resentment and fear.

"When it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear. And Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And after he said this, he showed them his hands and his side, and then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. And Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when Jesus had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven."

Easter people, that's our Easter story. The Holy Spirit is the way Jesus shares his gift of love and his resurrection with us. And if we share his life, then we also share his mission. St. John here describes the mission in terms of the forgiveness of sins.

And it's our calling, our baptismal calling, that we enter into this very same mission. It's basic to carrying on the forgiveness of sins. Conflicts will happen; they will abound, but for every conflict we have with another person I see at least three ways that Scripture gives us as guidance to forgive.

Proverbs 19:11 reads, "Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it's to their glory to overlook an offense." Now, many disputes are so insignificant that they can be resolved by quietly overlooking an offense. And so, overlooking, Biblically, means forgiving, without even talking to the other person.

That's at one level. But if an offense is too serious to overlook, or has damaged our relationship, Christ Jesus calls us to reconcile personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. And so, in Galatians 6:1 we hear this admonition: "My friends," Paul writes, "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

Now, even if we successfully reconcile relational issues we may still need to work through and negotiate material issues related to money, property, or other rights. And when negotiation is needed, let Philippians 2:1-4 serve as our guide. "If there's any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete," Paul says. "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

These words of Jesus, the life-giving Spirit, this feast, lure us into peace. We're lured so deeply into peace, so much so that folks like Gentiles and tax collectors become the special focus of our relentless care.

And when we are lured into forgiveness, instead of litigation, but we seek mediation. Instead of division, we seek negotiation. Instead of hostilities, we seek peace.

You see, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, heaven's agenda is for two on Earth, previously alienated, to come together in agreement. And the God of love is present when two or three are gathered, not only around their own injuries, but also in the name of Jesus. And when this gathering is an intensified search for togetherness, then Jesus is not with one, or with the other; he's there *among them*.

And here again, we have Jesus doing what he always does: he's breaking down barriers between people and encouraging the restoration of relationships. Jesus is manifesting the love of God, which is the power that drives everything there is, toward everything else that is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.