

“If another sins against you...”
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
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A human being is a part of the whole called by us “the universe,” a part limited in time and space. One experiences oneself, ones thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for few persons nearest to us. Our task is to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

Texts: Romans 13:1-4, 7-12 & Matthew 18:21-22

Peter is trying to figure out this forgiveness thing. This is the same Peter who will become a formative leader in the early church – writer of texts we receive as holy; revered through the ages as one of the twelve apostles. Forgiveness is difficult: difficult to understand; difficult to practice. What does it mean to forgive somebody? Does the other have to say they’re sorry – or make restitution – before we can forgive? If we forgive, are we supposed to forget too? And if we can’t forget, does this mean we haven’t forgiven? Does forgiveness deal too lightly with a wrong; does it fail to take seriously the importance of justice? If the other continues hurting us, hurting others, how many times are we expected to forgive?

Peter is confused. Understandably so. Peter was raised on the laws and in the traditions of the Jewish faith. The God of the Jews is, if nothing else, a God of justice. It was the Jewish community’s sense of justice that pointed the way out of the ancient practice of unlimited retaliation for a wrong to the principle of limited retaliation – “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” – exacting from an offender no more, no less than the measure of the offense.

But Peter senses that the way of “an eye for an eye” is not Jesus’ way. Jesus had plainly said it in his Sermon on the Mount, even if Peter hadn’t understood it at the time. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.... (Matthew 5:38-39).” And later, when Jesus taught Peter and the others to pray, “Forgive us what we owe you, Father, as we forgive others their debt to us

(Matthew 6:12).” Peter is beginning to understand that forgiveness isn’t simply one of Jesus’ many teachings. Forgiveness is the cornerstone of Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus is describing another path through human brokenness and community conflict; a way that puts an end to the otherwise unending back and forth of tit for tat. Forgiveness is God’s way to settle the score and start over. That’s all and good, of course, Jesus’ teaching, God’s way. But we live in the real world, so there has to be a practical limit to this way of doing relationship. Gratefully, Peter asks for all of us, “Lord, if another sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” “No,” Jesus says, “not seven times... seventy-seven times.”

This phrase, *seventy-seven times*, it appears in only one other place in the Bible – in the fourth chapter of the Book of Genesis (vss.23-24). When Jesus used the phrase, he may have been recalling the account of one of the descendants of Cain, a man named Lamech. After committing a horrible offense, Lamech sang a song boasting of unlimited retaliation. Scholars refer to it as the “Song of Swords.”

*I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*

Jesus’ point is clear. As unlimited as Lamech was in wielding violence to address a wrong – the boy had hit Lamech; Lamech responded by killing the boy! – God’s way of forgiveness is as unrestrained.

I mentioned last week that, at a conference held at St. Malo’s Retreat Center in Allenspark, Scott and I were gifted to sit under the teaching of Miroslav Volf. Volf is a Croatian-American, a theologian teaching at Yale University’s Divinity School. Volf talked at length about forgiveness.¹ He said that forgiveness is the only truly healing path through the pain of a broken relationship, through the complexities of our broken world. Far from an academic lecture, Volf talked about his childhood roots in the church in Croatia, the six people who shaped his life from early on, and the suffering of his people during the Balkan War – Croats and Serbs, Muslims and Christians. He spoke of the bitterness that remains, a continuing hunger for revenge on the part of some, and the hope of most, still, for just solution – each group, of course, having its own definition of what would be the just end to the conflict.

Then he made this observation. Far from discounting the importance of justice – ignoring the weight of the debt that is owed the offended – forgiveness actually takes the debt very seriously. When we forgive another who has wronged us, we affirm the value of justice by naming the violation – the broken relationship, the inflicted wound. We acknowledge that there’s a debt to be paid, *then we forgive it* – offering to forego our just claim against the other. Each act of forgiveness then has the potential to put an end to the downward spiral of retaliation, charges and counter charges, gathering of witnesses and endless court appearances. Forgiveness opens the possibility of a new future, reconciliation, mutual understanding. In the church we call it resurrection.

Here, of course, is the rub. There's no guarantee that forgiveness offered will result in forgiveness received. The act of forgiving leaves us vulnerable. When we forgive another, we reflect the image of God. But we know what happened to the one who incarnated the fullness of God.

So, like the rest of us who are following along behind Jesus, Peter's trying to figure out this forgiveness thing. It's not easy. Like Peter, we'll find the key to understanding and the practice of forgiveness in the place where we find our identity. Peter has to choose. Does he think of himself as:

- An individual making his lonely way in an indifferent world; or as
- A person whose life is defined by some terrible wrong that has been perpetrated against him; or as
- A member of a tribe in competition with other tribes, in Peter's case the Jews against the rest of the world; or as
- A disciple of Jesus.

Peter chooses Jesus, follows him all the way to the end.

Picture Peter, now, standing somewhere near the cross where Jesus has just been nailed, arms outstretched as if in an embrace of the whole of humankind. Here, Peter is given another lesson in forgiveness, the defining lesson. Jesus looks down at the soldiers who have tortured and crucified him and the disciples who have abandoned him and prays, "Father, forgive them..." At the foot of the cross, we find ourselves standing beside each other – the offender and the offended, the perpetrator and the victim. Together, we hear Jesus ask God to forgive all of us our debts. It's here, at the foot of the cross, where we find the will and the strength to forgive because we have been forgiven; to love because we have been loved; to break the cycle of retribution and exclusion.

We live in a broken world. I'm trying to figure out this forgiveness thing. Jesus says the way forward toward its healing begins in our turning from the impulse for retaliation and relinquishing of our right to restitution. I'm hoping that the way forward might begin in just the desire to turn and relinquish. Jesus says the way forward begins in our practice of forgiveness. I pray that it might begin in even our longing to be able to forgive. Jesus says a future different from the past begins in a conversation with the offender. Again, I pray that a new day might begin in even our willingness to begin the conversation. As Miroslav Volf reminds us, the Way begins at the foot of the cross where, in spite of all the wrongs perpetrated upon us, the voice we hear the clearest is that of Jesus praying to God for each of us, "Father, forgive them..." Then trusting that God has answered Jesus' prayer. For God's sake. For the sake of God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

The conference where Miroslav Volf spoke was hosted by a church in St. Joseph, Missouri, Word of Life Church.² Brian Zahnd is the church's lead pastor. At the end of the conference, the last night, the group was invited to share together at the Lord's Table. Then Brian described a practice that his congregation shares every so often. The congregation is encouraged to stand and turn to one other, one on one.

Facing each other, the first person is encouraged to say to the second, "Forgive me." The second replies, "God forgives." The second then says to the first, "Forgive me," to which the first responds, "God forgives."³ Then, each moves to another, and then another, where the request is repeated, "Forgive me", and the assurance too, "God forgives." I'm going to ask us to take a few minutes to share the experience. Then, we'll come to the Table of Forgiveness & New Life.

Carrie, will you help me example the experience...?

...Pray with me.

God, you're the author of life and its many gifts: its beauty, its diversity, its as yet undiscovered wonders. We're sorry for the ways we spoil your good creation and wreak havoc on our relationships, how easily we wrong each other, and how quick we are to exact a payback for wrongs perpetrated against us. Thank you for forgiving the debt we owe you; nurture in us a heart and a hunger to forgive the debts others owe us. Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

— Jeff Wright
sersb11

¹ Volf explored the themes of his book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996, Abingdon Press).

² Word of Life Church (www.wick.com) hosts an annual *Faith & Culture Conference*. Brian's blog site: www.brianzahnd.com.

³ At our second service, the person I asked to "example" the practice of forgiveness spoke up and asked, "Why are we to say, 'God forgives'; why don't we say, 'I forgive'?" I had given it some thought. This is the context of my response. I think, maybe, because to unexpectedly ask members of the congregation to offer personal forgiveness could be asking too much of some: those not ready or willing to offer their personal forgiveness; those in whom the sermon has stirred thoughts of the unfinished business of a deep wrong perpetrated against them. But to invite persons to say, "God forgives", is to invite them into the transformative truth that God does indeed forgive all of us, and that when we offer our forgiveness we're actually participating in communicating God stance of forgiveness toward the perpetrator.