

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, September 17, 2023 based on
Matthew 18:21-35

“This Forgiveness Thing is Hard”

This forgiveness thing is hard work. It is a process that we aren't very good at. It is like a dance. Someone has to lead or take the first step. You will surely step on each other's toes in the process. You will mess up. It takes practice. But in the end, it is worth the effort.

One person might be ready for forgiveness, but you aren't. Maybe you are waiting for someone to apologize, but they may not even know they hurt you. Can you still forgive without repentance? We humans are like elephants when we are wronged... we don't forget. We hold grudges. You hear the phrase, “forgive and forget”. Who can do that?

The only one I know who can do that is God, who remembers our sin no more according to Jeremiah 31:34. So let's start there. That is our foundation for forgiveness. How much does God forgive us? An unlimited amount. No matter how hard we humans mess things up, we can't undo the work of Jesus on the cross. As we collectively confessed our sins today and will take communion, I can proclaim that you are forgiven. So, our attempt at human forgiveness is always grounded in God's forgiveness for us.

That includes forgiving ourselves too. Learning to forgive ourselves and accept God's grace is also a journey.

We also have to remember that the person we struggle with needs Jesus just as much as you do.

Story “Leaking Sins”

One of the men in a community committed a serious sin. The council called a meeting and requested the Teacher to attend. When he refused to come, they sent a delegation telling him the matter was most urgent. “Since you insist,” he said, “I will come in about 30 minutes.”

When he arrived at the meeting of the council, the Teacher entered the room carrying a leaking jug on his back, filled with water. The members of the council asked, “Teacher, what is this?”

“All day long,” the Teacher replied, “my sins run out behind me and I am unaware of them. Yet despite my blindness to my own sin, today I am asked to judge the error of another.”

When they heard the words of the Teacher they forgave the man who had sinned and said no more.

We are all in the same boat. We all need God’s grace equally.

In our Gospel, Peter, who Jesus just called rock, and who identified Jesus as the Messiah, wants to put a limit on forgiveness. How many times do I have to forgive, Jesus? Is 7 enough? There has to be a limit on patience with misbehavior... right? Jesus says to Peter, “No not 7, but 77 times... Which really represents an unlimited amount of forgiveness.

Then Jesus tells a parable. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus lays out an image of forgiveness in his kingdom. A king wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. One slave racked up such an unpayable debt, 10,000 talents. This would be equivalent to a day’s wages for 100 million laborers. Listeners would groan when they heard the ridiculous amount owed. After the slave begs for forgiveness, saying he would pay it all back, the king forgives the debt. But when he went to a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii, 100 days wages, and said, “Pay what you owe.” He refused to forgive the debt. The king heard about it and rescinded his forgiveness, saying, “Should you not have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

What is Jesus getting at here? If you don’t forgive you will be thrown into prison. Not literally. But knowing how much we are forgiven, when we withhold it from others it is like being in prison. It is all consuming. Jesus knows we will hurt each other, but he wants a community grounded in God’s forgiveness.

And we know that forgiveness is not to be confused with toleration of hurtful or abusive behavior. In those situations, there has to be true repentance and fruit of repentance. Trust has to be rebuilt. Sometimes premature forgiveness could be an easy way out that enables the

offender to avoid changing. So again, forgiveness is a process like a dance.

We are called to be people who forgive. It is painful when we don't. And you can forgive someone from a distance. You can forgive without repentance... although it is always better when someone has a broken heart over what they have done. Like the story. Half our sins leak out and we don't even know what they are.

I will invite Jim Miller to finish my sermon with a song called Forgiveness Waltz by Jonathon Rundman. You are welcome to join at the end.

Amen