

Church of Possibilities Sermon
Advent 2, December 8, 2024
Theme: Forgiveness

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel.

He has come to his people and set them free...

He promised to show mercy to our fathers

And to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,

To set us free from the hands of our enemies....

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give his people knowledge of salvation

By the forgiveness of their sins....

To shine of those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,

And to guide our feet into the way of peace.

What is holding us back? From what do we need to be set free? How can we know salvation, how can we forgive others, and receive forgiveness ourselves? How can we, in these turbulent times, with all the anger and division that surround us, how can we find the way of peace?

Our theme for today in the Church of Possibilities is forgiveness. Rev. Elise prepared and shared with me one of her experiences with forgiveness. I hope that, at some point in the future, she is well enough to share it with all of you.

Rather than try to tell Elise's story—and probably messing it up—I am going to share with you a bit of my own experience with forgiveness.

As a child, I remember being taught a lot about forgiveness. The first is a definition of forgiveness, of justification, using the phrase, “just as if I'd never sinned.” That, if we ask for forgiveness, if we confess our sins to God and ask for forgiveness from God and from our neighbors, that it becomes just as if we'd never sinned. Everything goes back to being good. All handled. All forgiven. All is right with the world.

And we were also told that forgiveness was a required part of following Christ's teaching. In Matthew, we have the account of Peter asking Jesus how many times we should forgive. Jesus' response was, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” or, in some translations, “seventy times seven.” Basically, as many times as it takes, we are supposed to forgive.

I remember struggling with this. When one of the kids at school would bully us, when they were caught out by the teachers, they would obediently apologize, and we were supposed to accept their apology, to just let it go, to forget all about it. Even if, the very next day (or the next time the teacher looked the other way), they did it again, and again, and again.

And when I pointed out that this wasn't addressing the issue, that it wasn't stopping the behavior, that we were still being hurt by this person, the response I got was that I wasn't being a good Christian, because I wasn't forgiving them, as the words in Matthew required me to do.

So, in addition to the original hurt I experienced from the bullying, I had the added weight of shame, shame and guilt that I was not a good enough Christian, that I was in fact the one who was sinning, because I was hurt, because I was angry, because I wanted the behavior to stop.

For a long time, I was sure that I was lacking as a Christian because I could not live up to this standard that was given, to let go, to forget, to make it just as if it

never happened, over and over and over again. I wanted to be able to forgive seventy times seven, but it just wasn't happening.

As an adult, one of the first topics I studied and prayed about and really dug into in my spiritual journey was this whole topic of forgiveness. I wanted to be a good Christian. And, as I looked at Jesus' life and ministry, at the times he stood up to those in authority on behalf of the marginalized, the outcasts, the abused, I just didn't think that this approach, this making oneself a victim over and over again, was what Jesus had in mind.

In my studies, one of the first things I uncovered was that my original definition of forgiveness was incorrect. Forgiveness is not forgetting something happened. Forgiveness is not wiping our memories clean and going back to a time before whatever hurtful thing took place. Forgiveness is not pretending nothing happened, and that our relationship with the person who caused the hurt is just like it was before.

Rather, forgiveness, is releasing the control and power that a hurtful person or situation has on our lives. Let me say that again, forgiveness is releasing the control

and power that a hurtful person or situation has on our lives. Not pretending it didn't happen. Not going back to the way it was before. But releasing the power and control, getting rid of the negative emotions stirred up by a hurtful situation.

And forgiveness, like grief, is a multi-step process. Forgiveness requires work on the part of the person who is doing the forgiving. And it can't be forced, for societal reasons. Yes, we can give in to social pressure, we can publicly accept someone's apology when it is offered, but true forgiveness requires more.

First, forgiveness requires truth. Not from the person or persons who caused the hurt—they may or may not ever ask for forgiveness. Rather, it requires us to be truthful about the hurt we have experienced. We need to identify what needs healing, who we want to forgive. And sometimes, the person we need to forgive is ourselves, because we have not lived up to our own expectations. ¹

Next, we need to figure out and work through the emotions that the hurt generated in us. And our

¹ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-deapth/forgiveness>

emotions may not always be the same. Sometimes we are shocked, surprised or disillusioned by the actions of another; it can cause a break in our relationship.

Sometimes, the hurt produces anger, at the other person or at ourselves. Other common responses are frustration, despair, resentment—or all of these at once. And it may take time to work through these emotions. Just when we think we've got a handle on the hurt, we may wake up the next morning angry or resentful or depressed.

These are all normal, natural emotions—and we should not beat ourselves up when (not if, but when) we feel them. Rather, we should recognize them, acknowledge them, and work to release them, release the control and power that the offending person and situation have in our lives.

I have found prayer to be an essential part of the process of forgiveness. Sometimes, forgiveness comes easily. But sometimes, the hurt runs deep. When that happens, I pray. I pray for the person or persons who hurt me—even when I don't particularly feel like it. I pray for myself, that God will grant me healing and forgiveness, so that I can let go of the

negativity that is infecting my relationships with those around me. And I pray for peace.

During our Church of Possibilities activity today, we will practice one form of releasing hurt. It consists of naming what has hurt us, writing it down or drawing a picture on paper, then saying a prayer of release. When we are ready, we can crumple up the paper and throw it away, letting go of the emotions as we physically discard the paper.

[Another tradition I learned from a Jewish friend of mine is to take a small rock, a pebble really, and to speak our emotions into the rock, to tell this piece of dust, from which we are made, all about whatever it is that is bothering us. Then, we take that pebble to a body of water—a stream or river or the ocean—and throw it as far as we can, while saying a prayer of release. Just as we give that small part of the earth back into God’s creation, we also give our negative emotions, our anger, our resentments, our hurts, over to God.]

There are other ways of finding release—through music, through art, through exercise, through nature. I encourage you to find the one that works best for you.

And to remember to include prayer, to draw on God's love and forgiveness for those times when our own falls short.

I find that this is something I can do over and over again, that I can do seventy times seven. That, with God's help, I can let go of the negative emotions, the anger, the frustration, the pain, and move, once again, into a place of love.

One of the other important lessons I have learned over the years about forgiveness, is that it doesn't completely wipe out the original hurt, nor is it supposed to. Rather, it allows for each of us to return to a positive relationship with God, one that is not clouded by resentment or anger.

Sometimes, it allows us to also return to a positive, although changed, relationship with the person who hurt us. And sometimes, it doesn't. The other person may not be in a position to change their behavior. They may not be sorry for what they have done. They may just not care.

One of the hardest lessons for me has been accepting that forgiveness isn't about changing the other

person's behavior—something I do not have the power to do. Instead, forgiveness is about dealing with, letting go, of the negative emotions I am experiencing, so that I can, once again, have a close, loving, and healthy relationship with God and with those around me.

Finding and maintaining this relationship with God, with each other, and even with myself, requires work. Forgiveness is a process. Hurts can pop up again, and we may need to repeat some of these steps multiple times before we can fully let go.

What we can be assured of is that God is with us each step of the way. Not just seven times, but seventy times seven times. As often as we need it, God is just a prayer away. And God will lead us with joy, in the light of God's glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from God. With God, we will find the way of peace.

Amen.