

**Sermon: Decisional Forgiveness Matthew 18: 15-35 Lent 1 February 26, 2023**  
**Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON**

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times."* -----

The Jewish and Christian traditions greatly value forgiveness. From our gospel reading today comes a reminder of how great is Jesus call to forgive our sisters and brothers when we feel they have wronged us.

The rabbis in the Jewish tradition in which Jesus stood taught "one should be pliant as a reed, not hard like the cedar in granting forgiveness" They held the law and forgiveness together. The law, the moral and religious rules that God gave to guide Gods people were given as gift. Law's companion volume was the gift of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a gift and we are called to forgive... but it is also hard sometimes.

Sometime forgiveness requires deeper understanding. When the United Church first considered apologizing to Indigenous people for residential schools, the wisdom of the indigenous elders was that we should wait. Before we ask to be forgiven they suggested we spend time reflecting on what we sought forgiveness for, and then if we were to ask for forgiveness, knowing, really knowing the harm we had done, the forgiveness offered would have greater meaning.

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Should we forgive a wrong that is still being committed against us? There are those who would use the words of Jesus as weapons to ensure that their victims would remain victims- demanding forgiveness while repeating the wrong again and again. The Jewish tradition in which Jesus lived required that a repeated offense should be forgiven three times. But it also put the moral burden on the one doing wrong saying that no one should seek forgiveness after committing the wrong a fourth time. The words of Jesus must not be used to perpetrate repeated wrongs.

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And ...are we always the one who should offer forgiveness? In his book, *the Sunflower* Simon Wiesenthal tells the story of how he, a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp, living in the midst of the Holocaust, was asked for forgiveness by a dying Nazi soldier who had committed atrocities against Jewish innocents. Years later he wondered about the moral correctness of his response. He could not bring himself in that moment to forgive the dying SS soldier. And he asks a variety of faith leaders from many traditions to reflect on his experience and to answer the question: Was it wrong that he did not...that he could not forgive...?

One of the responses to Simon's question about forgiveness is profoundly wise and comes from a Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel and in rabbinic style he tells a story of his own...

*A great rabbi from the city of Krakow was travelling home by train. As was his custom when he travelled, he dressed in rough clothes; to avoid people making a fuss over him. He looked pretty shabby and poor as he sat in the train berth.*

*A couple of young men entered his berth and seeing a poor old man travelling alone they decided to entertain themselves. They roughed up the rabbi and hurled insults at him.*

*When the train arrived in Krakow a delegation from the city's synagogue were there to greet their rabbi at the station. The young thugs were mortified. Had they known their travelling companion was a great rabbi they would have treated him better. They approached the rabbi and asked for forgiveness. No the rabbi said. I cannot forgive you.*

*The next day the young men sent a friend to the rabbi. On their behalf he asked for the rabbi's forgiveness. "If they had known you were the Rabbi of Krakow they would never have been so harsh to you." The rabbi, again, could not forgive.*

*The next day the men themselves begged for the rabbi to receive them. In person, they asked him again for forgiveness. "Rabbi, we did not recognize you. Forgive us! "*

*"No I cannot forgive you "he replied.*

*"Why not? "They asked. "We are truly sorry for what we did to you. "*

*The rabbi answered. "You roughed up a poor man on a train and when you realized he was a rabbi you asked for the rabbi's forgiveness. The rabbi cannot forgive you. Perhaps if you ask the poor old man that you harmed for forgiveness he may forgive you.*

Can we really offer forgiveness for harm done to someone else? Sometimes it is not our place to offer forgiveness.

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Forgiveness may be hard. It is also a gift

A friend was approaching the end of his life. And part of his getting ready for that great transition was the work of forgiveness. He shared that past hurts and injustices can accumulate inside of us. We can carry unconsciously or deliberately, a list of the wrongs that have been done to us. We can carry a grudge, nurse anger or self-pity. And in doing this we weigh ourselves down as we carry that heaviness and hurt around. So my friend worked on forgiveness as an end of life project. He wanted to let go of past burdens, to lighten the emotional and spiritual load he carried before moving on...

Forgiveness can be hard. But might *not forgiving* can be even harder? Forgiveness may set us free, lighten our load and heal our spirits.

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There are stories of those who are remarkable in their ability to forgive. Remember a story from some years ago ... a shooter entered a one-room Amish school in western Pennsylvania, dismissed all but 10 girls, and fired at them execution-style, killing five before shooting himself.

Within hours, the Amish community stated publically that they forgave the killer and his family. News of their forgiveness stunned the outside world almost as much as did the incident itself. Many praised the Amish, but others worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy.

Members of the Amish community began offering words and actions of forgiveness within hours of the event. A grandmother laughed when asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually thought we had a meeting to plan forgiveness?"

The father of a murdered daughter explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did." Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. Of the 75 people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day or so before. Amish people also contributed to a fund for the shooter's family. They embraced the parents of the shooter, who were farm neighbors to show there was no enmity between them.

Steven Nolt, an Amish studies scholar said that, for most people, forgiveness and acceptance come at the end of a long emotional process. But the Amish forgive first, and then every day work through the emotions of it. He called this "decisional forgiveness". For most people, a decision to forgive comes – if ever – at the end of a long emotional journey that may stretch over months if not years. The Amish invert the process. They begin with forgiveness. Then they do the work.

Forgiveness is hard and it is a gift.

As we come to the table of Jesus today consider a medieval Christian parable. In heaven the Apostles get together to celebrate the last supper. There is one empty chair. Through the door comes Judas. Christ rises and embraces him, offers him a seat with them and says: "we have been waiting for you." Amen