

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Freed in Forgiveness

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the Way of Christ involves an over abundance of forgiveness, in stark contrast to most teachings then (and now!). By the time of Jesus' ministry on earth there was a long-standing interpretation of the Torah that people should strive to forgive someone **up to** three times. Then along comes Peter; after hearing Jesus center the powerless then teach a process of reconciliation, he asks a question with a very generous assumption: "how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"¹

Jesus' answer expresses the amazing breadth and depth of God's love, grace, and forgiveness. Seven times is not enough, rather seventy-seven times (or seven times seventy)! Which, given Hebrew numerology's belief that seven signifies completeness or perfection, means that followers of the Way should be constantly forgiving. Forgiveness is a way of life for those on Christ's Way.

Now if that sounds difficult, well...it is! Once again the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross, is not easy! It requires un-centering ourselves in ways that we naturally resist. The Way of Christ means regularly doing the opposite of what the world teaches. Give up on revenge! Let go of grudges! Forgive! Seek reconciliation! Hold yourself, and others, accountable. It quickly becomes apparent why Jesus taught that "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."²

Forgiveness is not easy! It's also very misunderstood. Forgiveness is not "letting bygones be bygones." That is minimization. Forgiveness does not involve glossing over harm or pressuring victims to "move on." That

¹ Matthew 18:21c (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 7:14

unwillingness to acknowledge harm is a defensive (or self-serving) delusion. Forgiveness begins with an acknowledgement of harm. If we are theologians of the cross we must bear to look at the cross...at the pain and brokenness of the world...and call it what it is: brokenness, suffering, sin. Forgiveness requires taking sin seriously.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. They are linked, and so it's no surprise that Peter is inspired to think of forgiveness after Christ's teaching on reconciliation, but they are **not** the same. Forgiveness can lead to reconciliation, but it doesn't always. Healing of relationships can take time, and sometimes it's just not possible in this life.

Forgiveness is a process. It is a process that is neither a shortcut past conflict to happy-ever-after, nor is it a fix-everything-in-five-easy-steps formula! Authentic forgiveness is a meandering journey that often involves self-reflection and a myriad of different thoughts and emotions. It typically involves having hard conversations and trying to see things from different perspectives. And it is a process that must center the victim (the powerless) and hold perpetrators accountable. Forgiveness, the way that Jesus lives it out, centers justice.

Forgiveness is the start of a journey. It would be great if the magic words, "I'm sorry," really were magic. Say the right words and everything's fixed! Don't we wish! But there are no magic words and life in community is messy and requires compassion and forgiveness. But there is forgiveness...there is a path towards healing harms, if we're willing to follow it.

Forgiveness means centering love...it means living as though we are all seeking to love one another better and more truly. It can mean being taken advantage of...but it is the healthiest way for humanity to live. Henri Nouwen writes, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

Forgiveness leads to freedom. Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.³

³ Lamott, A. (2000). *Traveling mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Anchor.

Pursuing forgiveness means no longer drinking the bitter poison of vindictiveness. Forgiveness frees us from the temptation to make our injury the center of our identities. The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber describes this better than I can:

“Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn’t actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we’re not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, ‘It’s okay,’ is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it’s saying, ‘What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren’t controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that’s worth fighting for.”

Matthew 18 teaches us some powerful characteristics about the Way of Christ. Following the Way of Christ, according to Matthew 18, means opening our eyes to see those without power, those who are hurting and oppressed, those whom the world excludes. It means pursuing reconciliation in ways that hold people (and communities) accountable to the harm done. And it means living out of a radical forgiveness that is grounded in God’s abundant, life-changing, forgiveness.

The Way of Christ is the Way for which we were created. And the freedom that can be found in this way is compelling enough for me to want to walk it, even though it is a narrow and difficult way. And I pray that you find this Way of freedom in forgiveness as compelling as I do! Compelling enough to give it a try anyway! Amen.