

“Expectations Transformed: Forgiveness”

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Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

A “lection” is a fancy church word for a reading. The words “lecture” or “lectern” come from the same root. A “lectionary,” therefore, becomes a set of scripture readings. Available to us are all sorts of lectionaries, but in general, we use something called the Revised Common Lectionary. It was compiled years ago by an ecumenical committee and includes, for each Sunday, an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a Gospel reading and an Epistle or second New Testament reading.

Some traditions, the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian, for example, are mandated to include each of the four readings in a mass or Eucharist. We have a little more latitude. We are not prescribed any particular readings for a Sunday morning at all. Nonetheless, probably for 99% of the time, we use the lectionary. We typically use the morning’s psalm reading as our call to worship, and then read two of the other three readings in the service itself, as we do this morning. Usually one of the readings is from the gospels, but not always.

I like the lectionary. It helps us plan, plan music, plan prayers. In our case, it links up with what the children are learning in Sunday school, and such consistency is a good thing. I also like the lectionary because of what my seminary president once told me, in that it allows the word to choose you and not the other way around. If I chose the texts each Sunday, you might begin hearing the same things again and again (more than you already do!). The lectionary takes us to passages we might not otherwise visit, and, while not fully comprehensive, gives us a variety of readings over time.

That is more than what you asked for on a Sunday morning, but every once in a while people ask me how we choose to read what we do.

The common lectionary exists in a three-year cycle, and we are in Year A. Each lectionary year focuses on one of the three synoptic gospels, synoptic being *another* fancy church word for “looked at together,” the synoptics being, therefore, Matthew, Mark and Luke, so similar in so many ways. The gospel of John, different in age and style and message, gets its own treatment in each of the three years.

Again, more than you asked for, but it does explain why today, and for the next two weeks, and then most of the remaining weeks until Advent, we will spend serious time with Matthew’s gospel.

Today, and in the next two weeks, our kind of mini-series will focus on parables from Matthew. In the spirit of our Year of Invitation, we will be invited to consider these parables in light of expectations, those we carry in our own lives and hearts and spirits, those that are placed upon us, and how, as he does with so many things, Jesus defies and challenges our expectations and then transforms them, inviting us into life that is liberated from expectations that weigh us down.

Today and next week we will look at the interplay between forgiveness and acceptance, big and important topics.

Paul, in Romans, poses an important question: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” We judge, others and ourselves, and we leave little room for forgiveness.

This was the same question Peter posed to Jesus. His question is about life in the church, in particular. That presumes a certain kind of community, does it not, where people are connected enough that they do things to harm the other, and connected enough more so that they make room for repentance and forgiveness.

Is there a limit, Peter asks Jesus. No, Jesus says. No limit to forgiveness.

And he tells a story whereby the rich king, out of pity, forgives the very large debt of one of his slaves. But as the slave leaves the king’s presence, he refuses to forgive the debt of a fellow slave. We cringe when we hear this, and yet it rings so true. The king hears about this and is furious with the non-forgiver. “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

In his fine book called *Exclusion and Embrace*, theologian Miroslav Volf writes about how difficult forgiveness is. “Deep within the heart of every victim,” he writes, “anger swells up against the perpetrator, rage inflamed by unredeemed suffering...Our cool sense of justice sends (this message): the perpetrator deserves unforgiveness; it would be unjust to forgive...Instead of wanting to forgive, we instinctively seek revenge.” (Pages 119-120)

And yet we know, do we not? We know that Jesus defies and transforms expectations about forgiveness not simply to be different, to be counter-cultural, to swim upstream against human instinct; he does so because it is right.

To be unforgiven, or to be unforgiving, leaves us enslaved, stuck in the past, unable to move ahead into a liberated future. Whether it’s making an inconsiderate comment to a loved one, a spouse or child, or committing an act of aggression or unthoughtfulness toward a co-worker, to refuse to acknowledge your wrong, to seek forgiveness on one side of the equation, or to refuse to hear the plea and accept the apology on the other, keeps the relationship bound by inequality, regret, resentment. That is no way for any of us to live. If we hold on, we are bound; if we are held on to, we are bound. If we let go, we are free.

Our world teaches us that it is weak to seek forgiveness and weak to offer it. That’s why forgiveness is so difficult. For one thing, it plays with, messes with, our common understandings of justice, of what is right and what is wrong. We get easily confused, culturally and personally, in thinking that forgiving accepts wrongdoing, glosses over words or acts that hurt, forgets casually.

Haddon Willmer (*Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, pages 245-247) writes this, however: “Forgiving is always a way of reckoning truthfully with what is wrong and hence is a way of remembering, in which the past wrong is not denied but deprived of its power to shape the future. It is not pure remembering in which the past stays with us, but a remembering which enables the transformation of the past so that it no longer destroys joy, peace, and love...When forgiving is effective,” Willmer writes, “wrong is remembered, but no longer sets the agenda for the future or consumes people’s lives.”

That is what is so truthful, and so challenging, about the forgiven, yet un-forgiving slave in our parable. Had he truly and fully received the king's forgiveness, rather than simply feeling like he had dodged a bullet or was off the hook, he would have forgiven the debt owed to him in a heartbeat. Instead, his heart is hard.

Peter's question to Jesus about how many times he needs to forgive is really not a mathematical question; it is a heart question, a faith question. We do not keep score on this, waiting until we have forgiven 77 times so that on the 78th we can exact revenge, hold a grudge. Rather, we adopt a posture of forgiveness in all of life, to all we meet, all the time.

Frederick Dale Bruner, in a fine commentary on Matthew's gospel, (pages 234-246) reminds us that for Jesus, forgiveness has no limits. We forgive 77 times because we are never to give up on anyone; just as God never gives up on us. We have a deep debt, Bruner writes, a debt so deep we could never pay it. That deep debt is met by a "deep forgiveness of all indebtedness by a gracious king."

And having been forgiven, we are now called to forgive. Forgiveness received is forgiveness given.

This is difficult, I know. It is for me. Sometimes I have difficulty moving beyond trivial things, words said or actions taken. Sometimes I have difficulty accepting things that are so clearly wrong, whether in the life of the church or in the world. Yet I know; we know. I know I have carried things with me for far too long. When I let them go, not forget but not hold on so tightly, I feel liberated. And when I am able to say, simply, "I am sorry, please forgive me," I feel liberated as well.

Again, it is worth saying that asking for and receiving forgiveness, or offering forgiveness when asked, does not make past wrongs disappear. Memory is important. But it does not set them in stone so that the heart becomes as a stone. It allows the relationship, any relationship, to move forward in light, not bound by old grudges.

What does that look like? We can imagine what it looks like in our own lives. As difficult as those moments are, we can imagine us saying the words we need to say, or receiving them when said. I have always regretted not doing it; I have always been thankful when I have done it. Yours will have its own flavor, but I bet the contours and outlines of your experiences will echo all those where true forgiveness happens.

And that will change not only our hearts, but the way we live our lives. Bruner writes that "a theology of forgiveness supports an ethic of forgiveness."

We know of moments of great forgiveness on the world's stage: Pope John Paul II forgiving the man who shot him; the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania welcoming and comforting the wife of the man who killed 10 Amish girls; the extraordinary story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, that recognized so clearly and powerfully the role of truth-telling and repentance, but also the core truth that the South African society would not be able to move ahead united until it embraced such hard-wrought forgiveness.

I don't know what that means for the issues of our day. At such levels, forgiveness requires sensitivity and support and time, that neither condones or forgets, and may be years in the coming, especially in the case of severe trauma or abuse experienced by individuals or groups.

This is complex and challenging. We are who we are, after all, broken and fallen, doing things and saying things – on our own or as parts of groups – and bound by the expectations of our own hearts and the world.

But here is what I know: I know that if we are to follow this one called Jesus, to live a life shaped by his life in any way, then forgiveness is one key ingredient in the recipe. And that our ability to forgive begins with the good news that we are forgiven by a gracious, loving, just, merciful God.

Forgive 77 times he said one time.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do, he said another time, hanging on a cross.

Jurgen Moltmann wrote that in forgiveness, “the universal religion of revenge is overcome and the universal law of retaliation is annulled. In the name of the Crucified one, from now on forgiveness holds sway...to forgive those who have wronged one is an act of highest sovereignty and great inner freedom.” (Volf, page 122) That is profoundly good news, and it is deeply true.

Forgive us our debts, he said another time, as we forgive our debtors. That’s our invitation. Amen.