

FORGIVING  
MATTHEW 18:21-35  
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I have long loved Mister Rogers. For years, one of my prized possessions was an autographed photo of Fred Rogers that he sent me when I was five-years-old. It read, "To Elizabeth From Your Television Neighbor." Either it's tucked inside a box somewhere or accidentally disappeared in a move from one place to the next. But the wisdom of Fred Rogers stays with me and has been part of me for my entire life.

He taught children, and their listening parents, to understand the spectrum of human emotions. Whether it was the many ways to say "I love you" or the very real feelings of anger as he taught us to pound our fists into clay, Mister Rogers made room for all of it. He helped us understand that we have choices in how we respond to our feelings, we have choices in our attitude for each new day, and we have choices in how we relate to others. We can choose to view the world from a neighbor's perspective and not just our own. We can choose to be honest about how we feel rather than hiding from emotions that overwhelm us or overwhelm others.

After Fred Rogers' death in 2003, his wife began to gather his sayings and found she had enough to publish small collections of his wisdom. In these collections he talks about love, understanding enemies, family, and the spectrum of human experience. In acknowledging the realities of anger and disappointment, he also talked about the practice of forgiving others.

"It's the people we love the most who can make us feel the gladdest...and the maddest!" he wrote. "Love and anger are such a puzzle! It's hard for us, as adults, to understand and manage our angry feelings toward parents, spouses, and children, or to keep their anger toward us in perspective. It's a different kind of anger from the kind we may feel toward strangers because it is so deeply intertwined with caring and attachment."

He continued, "Forgiveness is a strange thing. It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than our friends. It can be hardest of all to forgive people we love. Like all of

life's important skills, the ability to forgive and the capacity to let go of resentments most likely take root very early in our lives."<sup>1</sup>

We talk with our children about the things we value at the beginning of every worship service. Parents do that at home, of course, but we have also begun marking just a few minutes each week in worship to talk about the things you and I are still learning and wrestling with. We pray these stories will take root in their lives. We turn to scripture to better understand the significance of partnership, love, grace, confession, forgiveness, and community. It is our prayer that these things take root in our story, too.

One of the primary themes of scripture is God's work to create a people. The man and woman of Genesis 1-3 are invited to live in God's garden in a particular way. The Hebrew Scriptures tell stories of God's promise to make a great nation through Abraham's descendants. Leviticus holds regulations for God's people so that all interactions between them are understood as potential opportunities for honoring God. Through leaders and judges and prophets and kings, God works to invite people to live together in ways that are not always instinctive, ways that need reminding and redirecting, and ways that reflect God's nature.

The apostle Paul continues these teachings with words for the church, often for specific congregations. The epistles contain reminders of how our speech matters, how even our care for our physical bodies matter, and how our care for one another should reflect God's care for us. The sayings and stories of Jesus rest in the middle of this thematic trajectory. From the poetry of the first beings to the end of all things, God is at work drawing people to God's way.

When I talk about this way of being together, I most often talk about being community. God invites us into community with God and with each other, and that is what happens here when we gather as church on St. Charles Avenue and Broadway. We do show up as individuals or as a small family unit to participate in this event of worship, but we're invited to carry the stuff of worship into our relationships across the room here, then back home, and into the world around us.

That's easier to process on the loving and spreading compassion Sundays than it is on the Sundays we consider our call to seek justice and dismantle the ways of injustice. It is easier to receive and affirm a Gospel word that God is with us, God hears us, God knows us than it is to walk into these messages on community ways – telling the truth, speaking openly, approaching each other with intention and kindness when we disagree, and being people who forgive even when those disagreements get fierce and

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<sup>1</sup> *The World According to Mister Rogers*, by Fred Rogers (pp. 55, 77)

seem insurmountable. If you hear the Gospel reading and scratch your head wondering just how serious Jesus could have been about the instruction to forgive, know you are not alone. It's the question Peter asks him, too.

Jesus rubbed his eyes and pressed against the pressure building in his forehead. He stretched his arms high above his head then behind his back. He readjusted and looked at the men before him. He was frustrated by the repetition of their questions but then filled with compassion as he considered their sincerity. They didn't mean to be thick about it, they just couldn't seem to digest what he was telling them about the ways of love and the ways of grace.

He'd tried illustrations, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...like yeast...like treasure hidden in a field...like a merchant in search of fine pearls...like a net thrown into the sea that caught fish of every kind."

And he would make sure they understood. "Have you understood all of this?" he asked. "Yes," they answered.

But they didn't understand, and he suspected as much.

Then they wanted to know who was his favorite. Who would have the most power. Who would count as second in command when everything came to a head.

He sighed, disappointed by the question but prepared for another lesson in how God's ways are different from the world's. "Be like children," he said. Trust God, trust the process, trust each other. Love simply and love well. Don't do anything to prevent each other from living in this way, and by all means, work it out when you forget and trip each other up.

Too much is at stake to be competitive about God's love. Be generous with it because God is generous with you. There are eternal consequences for getting this right or wrong. By all means, sit down when you disagree. Talk it over. Even if you will never come to consensus, bless each other and move on. It's better for earth and heaven if you can let go of the hurts that distract you and move back into the calling of this present moment.

And that's when Peter chimed in, "How many times do we have to do that, Jesus? How many times do we have to bless each other and move on? How many times do we have to listen to you say this? Because some of these guys seem to trip me up a lot. Some of them really make me angry. It's a distraction. And what about the ones who do it on purpose? They don't want what's best for me. Can't I just stay angry? Because they do. What you're asking isn't fair. How many times do I try to make it right before I can give up and walk away?"

Practicing what he preached, Jesus took that deep, slow breath while he rubbed his eyes. Oh, kid. We're still talking about this? Okay. Let's try again. Actually, that's the

answer. Try again. You keep trying over and over again. That doesn't mean you're always returning to the person who offended you. In fact, there are some times you do walk away, but you walk away with blessing. And the forgiveness may have to happen in your heart again and again. Even when the relationship is far behind you, you will need to keep forgiving within your being so it doesn't devour you from the inside out. Seventy times seven or 100 times 100. Just keep trying.

This Gospel lesson is one of the more familiar, and is likely one you've heard many times. In its repeated hearing, we may overlook what is odd about Peter's question to Jesus of how many times to forgive. We link forgiveness to wrongdoing and almost always want to know the details of the story. Our minds wander to gossip and taking sides: does she deserve to be forgiven or punished? Does he deserve to be welcomed back or written off?

We miss a major point when we become distracted by these secondary questions. David Lose writes, "It's not that Jesus wants Peter to increase his forgiveness quota, you see, it's that he wants him to stop counting altogether simply because forgiveness, like love, is inherently and intimately relational rather than legal and therefore cannot be counted. **Had Peter asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor, we'd perceive his misunderstanding: love can't be quantified or counted. But he asks about forgiveness and we miss his mistake.**"<sup>2</sup>

It's also important that we not make another mistake by making a caricature out of forgiveness. So we must take time to consider what Jesus' words DO mean and do NOT mean. Last week we looked at holy friendships and the sacred significance of handling conflict within community in direct, intentional ways. Jesus promised that God will honor these intentions by being present when 2 or 3 gather in God's name. The next word in that chapter is Peter's question: how many times. So the action of the community as direct, open, honest, willing to have hard conversations is tied to the language of being as generous in forgiveness as we are in love.

But there are times when forgiveness is about our own healing, about letting go of how we hoped a story might play out, about moving on with God's blessing. Over the past two weeks, a social media campaign developed in response to the Ray Rice headlines. Thousands of people participated by sharing #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft stories in an attempt to shed light on the realities of domestic violence. I took note of the numerous stories of abuse victims who said they stayed in violent homes because their pastor told them to forgive, their pastor told them to pray about it, their pastor told them to love,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-14-a/>

their pastor told them God hates divorce, their pastor told them to work it out. They stayed because their pastor told them to stay.

But this larger passage in Matthew 18 about confronting and truth telling and forgiving as you love and forgiving as you have been forgiven is about creating a community that honors the image of God in each of us and all of us. The passage is not encouraging us to tolerate perpetual conflict or abuse or serious dysfunction for the sake of holding the community together or the family together or the relationship together.

Eric Barreto expounds on this connection, saying: “Like last week’s invocation to confront a disruptive person in the community, Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness could well be abused. Forgiveness does not mean the embrace of violence perpetrated against us. It does not mean giving free reign to those who would do us harm. It does not mean a ready acquiescence to those who are stronger than us. The context of these teachings is key. Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God’s love, not the curse of abuse or a reflection of our worst tendencies as humans.

In this context, the exhortation to unending forgiveness is a counter-balance to the confrontations dictated in the previous verses. Confrontation without forgiveness does not reflect the good news, and neither can forgiveness that eschews the confrontations that made forgiveness necessary in the first place speak truthfully about reconciliation and healing.”<sup>3</sup>

Living into the invitation to be a God-honoring community means we are bringing out the best in each other. These challenging ways of living and loving together should make us more fully ourselves and more fully in touch with who God created us to be. Whether destructive behavior comes from beyond us or within us, these ways of loving and forgiving should separate us, physically and metaphorically, from destruction and violence. The way of God is the way of shalom, peace, flourishing. When we are forgiving as a people, we are praying for the flourishing of the one we forgive and for ourselves. And the community around us helps us discover both the ways to forgive and the ways of God’s peace.

In heeding Jesus’ words, in committing to being a loving, forgiving community, we are praying with our actions and with our very lives:

*Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;*

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2165](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2165)

*Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life<sup>4</sup>.*

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi