

Forgiveness, Part 2:
FOURgiveness – The Four Requirements for True Forgiveness

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Scripture:

Matthew 18:21-22 (NRSV)

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Luke 17:3-4 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

Last week, we observed how Jesus links being a loving person with being a *forgiven* person. Jesus once asked Pharisee who would love a certain creditor more: a person who was forgiven the equivalent of 500 days wages or one who was forgiven 50? The Pharisee answered that clearly the person who had been forgiven the greater debt would love the creditor more.

We don't hear it preached in Mainline churches very much, but according to Jesus, God actually wants to forgive us enormous debts – that is, forgive us for enormous amounts of sin.

Why? For one thing, God knows better than we do how broken we are! Yet it also doesn't take much intelligence to realize that, if God has the capacity to absorb the sin, rather than seek to "balance" the sin with a bit of old-fashioned wrath, then there is a strong likelihood that an experience of God's amazing grace will change the person's heart. In one parable, Jesus speaks of God forgiving a person the equivalent of 7 billion dollars! (We'll cover this parable later in the series.) No, massive forgiveness, when it is truly and gratefully received, tends to turn a person from running away from God to running *toward* God.

It works the same way in human relationships. Once, when Abraham Lincoln was criticized for being too lenient on the South and not destroying his enemies, he replied, "Am I not destroying an enemy when I make a friend of him?"

Of course, forgiving the sins of an enemy requires the ability to absorb the harm in order to keep from perpetuating the cycle of violence. That's why forgiveness can be so difficult. Grace is *costly*. It always means absorbing harm rather than fighting fire with fire.

In this respect, Grace runs flat out against the Law of Karma, or Cosmic Balance. According to Buddhist and Hindu belief, Karma requires that the scales of justice be balanced. If you cause harm, you receive harm. If you do good, you receive good.

If you believe in Karma, I would note that offering Grace to a person may not mean actually breaking Karma's Law. It may mean that you are playing the "long game" rather than the "short game." That is, you are betting that, by continuing to absorb the harm rather than "balance" the scale by inflicting harm, you will eventually create the possibility of transformation in the one who has harmed you. By receiving continual forgiveness, this person may eventually break down and become your friend. It takes a lot of energy to keep hitting the air! If the person becomes your friend, she or he will likely eventually offset the scales of justice by creating more good in the world – toward you and toward others.

Well, this is all well and good to play the long game, but what happens if offering grace and forgiveness doesn't have any positive effect on the one causing the harm? Then, one's "enemy" not only remains an enemy, but their strength increases because the evil they create remains unchecked. And the victim is increasingly victimized.

In our scripture this morning, Peter asks how many times a person must forgive, offering his own estimation: "as many as seven times?" To this, Jesus responds, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In Luke's gospel, the answer is actually "seventy *times* seven"!

Clearly, Jesus wants us to at least try to play the "long game" with people – not simply because he's generous but because he knows how evil works. If the punch is returned, evil gains energy because the person gains an excuse to punch back harder. But if the punch is not returned, evil becomes like a fist punching against thin air. Eventually, evil runs out of steam because evil has no intrinsic, self-perpetuating energy. In order to maintain itself, it must attach itself to the energy of good – such as a fist righteously returned toward the person who has caused harm – then reflect it back. A punch for a punch.

Yet playing the "long game" with evil only works if the person who is harmed has the capacity to keep absorbing it. When small amounts of harm are inflicted, most any healthy person has the capacity simply to let it go. But what if large amounts are inflicted. Or what if small amounts are inflicted over a long period of time? If the harm doesn't stop, all one is doing by perpetually absorbing the harm is enabling evil.

Jesus doesn't expect us to be superhuman or enablers. He knows better than we do how broken we are, and how broken those who harm us are. Therefore,

Jesus also teaches that God provides a “safety valve” – a way of preventing the harm being done without fighting fire with fire.

Jesus teaches that forgiveness is not about simply “forgiving and forgetting.” It is a *process*. A four-fold process. If the process breaks down, there is no requirement to forgive. Rather, one is simply asked to step away from the relationship, lest the person absorb more harm than they can handle.

You see, Christian LOVE may be unconditional, but Christian FORGIVENESS is actually is highly conditional. Listen to Jesus’s words in Luke’s gospel: “**IF** another disciple sins, you **must** rebuke the offender, and **IF** there is repentance, you **must** forgive. And **IF** the same person sins against you seven times a day, *and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,'* you **must** forgive.”

Again, forgiveness is a *process*. It's a process that involves humility, vulnerability and risk on both sides of the table. It's not a unilateral decision to forget that anything ever happened.

You’ve heard of the Three R’s in education? I like to think of the Four R’s when it comes to forgiveness:

Rebuke
Repent
Release
Restore

The four R's are like the sides of a cattle corral. If any one is left out, the whole herd can escape and all your corralling is wasted.

REBUKE

I must confess that erecting the first side of the corral is my least favorite: Rebuke. “If another disciple sins, you *must* rebuke the offender,” says Jesus. When I was a child I was taught that if you can't say anything nice, you shouldn't say anything at all. My family valued this little maxim about as highly as the Golden Rule. To openly express anger, rage, or disappointment was considered disrespectful; a form of dishonor that was to be avoided in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Yet, when we read the Gospels, we find Jesus rebuking people all the time and commanding us to do likewise. My instinct tells me that rebuking someone would obstruct the process of forgiveness, not help it. But the way Jesus uses rebuke shows that my instincts aren't always correct. Jesus rebukes people not to condemn people, but to restore the relationships – relationships between members of the community, and relationships between people and their God.

The Greek text brings out the power and significance of what Jesus is saying better than the English. The word Jesus uses that we translate as "rebuke" (ἐπιτίμησον) is a word whose root means "honor" – as in "honor your father and your mother" (Matt 15:4). You see what Jesus is doing here? He's going directly counter to our intuition ... and he's right. To honestly and frankly express hurt – even vent rage – *if done for the purpose of restoring a relationship* is a very high form of honor.

I once heard a story about a minister whose marital relationship was about as ineffectual as his work in the parish. After several years of marriage, his wife started cheating on him. Feeling a growing sense of shame for committing this breach of trust, the woman showed up in her husband's office one afternoon tearfully confessing the affair. Her confession was met with an uncomfortable period of silence. Then, a gentle smile crossed her husband's face as he responded, "I forgive you."

The woman lashed out at him, plucking a book off his shelf and hurling it at his head from across the room. "How can you be so cold?!" she screamed "How can you be so *cold*?!"

Who was acting more un-Christian at that point: the minister, or his wife? If you think his wife, think again. When we've been hurt and betrayed by someone we love, honesty *requires* rebuke.

The minister was sending one of two messages by jumping straight to "forgiveness," either: "Our relationship doesn't matter enough to me for betrayal to cause me pain," or "I'm going to be more false with you than you ever were with me. I'll just pretend that nothing's wrong." Without "honoring" her by breaking down in tears and even lashing out in anger, true forgiveness and healing could never take place. The woman knew this intuitively; hence, her response.

REPENT

To express one's feelings honestly begins the process of forgiveness. What happens next is up to the person being rebuked. This is the part that's often overlooked when forgiveness is mistaken for "forgetting." In order for true forgiveness to take place – the kind that fully restores relationship and allows love to grow – the person who caused the harm must acknowledge the wrong and desire forgiveness. The person must repent. The primary New Testament word for "repent" (*metanoia*) means a "a complete change of thought". The primary Old Testament word for repent (*shuv*), means "to turn around."

In other words, for true forgiveness to take place, a person must "change their way of thinking" – that is, acknowledge that they have acted in the wrong. And they must "turn around" – that is, change their behavior along with their way of thinking.

If there is no repentance, forgiveness is not only impossible, but God would not want us doing it. After all, to “forgive and forget” when the person has no remorse for what they have done or intention of ceasing to harm you, is to become the person’s enabler. If God were to “forgive and forget” in such cases, God would be siding with evil.

Of course, God doesn’t side with evil. Neither should you. If a person is intent on continuing to harm you, you cannot – and must not – forgive them. There are things you can do to prevent yourself from being harmed, like stepping away from the relationship. But we’ll consider these scenarios more fully next week.

RELEASE

If a person truly is repentant, the next stage in the process of forgiveness is to release the debt. To forgive someone entails wiping the slate so clean that, at least where guilt is concerned, it’s as if the wrong never happened. It’s like taking a calculator and pressing the “Clear” button. The total returns to zero, no matter what number was on its screen.

In light of this, it’s amazing that Jesus says, “If the same person sins against you *seven times a day*, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘*I repent*,’ you *must* forgive.” That seems really awkward and, frankly, un-Realistic. But Jesus is deliberately citing an extraordinary situation in order for us to get clear on the process. If you don’t bear in mind the Four R’s and leave even one of them out, then his statement completely breaks down.

If you think Jesus is asking you to “forgive and forget” whenever a person merely asks for forgiveness, you’re not hearing him clearly. If you wipe the slate clean without the wrong-doer ever really repenting then you cannot forgive the person because God has not forgiven the person.

Jesus says we must forgive ***IF*** there’s repentance – *if* the person truly sees the light and commits herself to restoring the good she has taken from the world. If genuine repentance takes place, then what Jesus is saying makes sense. Our continuing to hold a grudge against the person only blocks their ability to complete the last stage of the forgiveness process: Restore.

RESTORE

If you are the person who has caused the harm and repented, Restoring means endeavoring so far as you are able to heal the hurt you have caused. It means making amends. That is, you try to make the person you have wronged whole again, in so far as you are able. This isn’t always possible, of course, because some wrongs are impossible to make right again.

In this case, the best you can do is seek to restore some measure of good that has been taken from the world through your actions. How this takes place ultimately is up to God and the person who has caused the harm. But the Holy Spirit always finds a way for one who has hurt another person to create some form of healing – if not for the person in question, then for someone else (perhaps several “someone else’s”).

The reason why Jesus says that forgiveness must be offered over and over again to someone who honestly repents and seeks to make amends, but then falls back into their bad behavior, is that we all tend to stumble in this process a bit. Our actions tend to have a “muscle memory” to them. When we’re used to acting one way, it’s hard to break the pattern, no matter how hard we may try. A person who is used to lashing out inappropriately in anger, for instance, isn’t likely to refrain from ever lashing out again, even when they have taken the forgiveness process seriously. Yet if forgiveness is consistently and repeatedly applied when the person causing the harm is sincerely trying to make an effort to change, then the spiritual muscles develop a new memory. The person changes their ways. The relationship is thus fully restored.

What does all this mean for Niantic Community Church? I think you’re smart enough to figure it out. But if you need a hint:

If you are harboring a grudge against someone in the congregation, you may want to consider how much God has forgiven you for your own sins. Chances are that over the course of your lifetime, you have cumulatively been forgiven by God for far more sin than this person has committed against you in a single instance, or set of instances.

Rejoice in your own forgiveness! Really. The more you receive and rejoice in your own forgiveness, the more power you have to absorb that of others.

But also know your limits. Know that, even according to Jesus – the master of forgiveness – if the forgiveness process has broken down repeatedly, and you have no margin left to absorb the harm, then it is perfectly good and right to step away from a relationship. This way, you remain out of harm’s way while also ensuring that you become part of the problem by returning fire with fire.