

September 17, 2023  
Pentecost 15 – Proper 19A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Exodus 14:19-31*

*Psalms 114*

*Romans 14:1-12*

*Matthew 18:21-35*

*In the Name of God whose property is always to have mercy,  
and whom we worship as Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today's gospel lesson is an extension of last week's reading about the importance of the Christian community as a witness to the world of God's love. Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is an echo of his instruction on prayer in Matthew 6; what we call the Lord's Prayer. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* Whether you prefer trespasses, or debts, or sins, the important word here is "as." *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

Let's take a moment and think about what we're actually asking God to do. Do we really want God to forgive us in the same way that we forgive others? Surely, it would be better if God was more generous to me than I generally manage to be for others. The point of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is that there is an connection between our capacity to be forgiven and our ability to forgive others.

Today, I want to offer some thoughts about forgiveness. This is not a list of the things that you should do, much less a list of the things that you must do. Instead, I want to offer a collage of thoughts from my own experience that fall into three groups. 1) Forgiveness is hard; 2) Experiencing forgiveness will change you; and 3) Forgiveness is a gift from God.

As providence would have it, Tim Lewis has chosen an excellent hymn for us to sing during Holy Communion today: "*Forgive our sins as we forgive,*" you taught us, Lord, to pray.

First, a word about the hymn and its author. Born in North India in 1905, Rosamond Herklots trained as a teacher at Leeds University. She taught school briefly, but from 1930 to 1980 she worked as a medical secretary for a London neurologist.

Herklots wrote "*Forgive our sins as we forgive*" in 1966 after digging out weeds in her nephew's garden. As she worked at the deep, tenacious roots, she saw a vivid parallel between the intrusive, smothering qualities of those weeds and the destructive

ways in which deeply buried bitterness and resentment prevent us from growing into the people God intended us to be.

### **Forgiveness is hard.**

“Forgive and forget” is one of those phrases that’s repeated so often that we think it’s in the Bible. Actually, it’s not. Beyond that, I don’t think that forgetting is ever really possible. Injuries always leave scars. Maybe a more helpful phrase would be “forgive and try not to weaponize.” Let me illustrate.

There you are on a sunny Saturday morning, and things are going along just fine. Suddenly, the conversation begins to tilt. Maybe it’s just a minor irritant; maybe it’s a grudge wanting to come out to play. And the conversation downshifts into a well-rehearsed series of aggravations. You know the kind of thing I mean, the direction of the toilet paper, the cap on the toothpaste tube, the folding of the newspaper. Then those four poison words make their appearance: “you always do that.”

And now, things are really skidding out of control, because you know that the conversation you’re having is not about the toilet paper or the toothpaste tube, or the newspaper, it’s about something else entirely. And that conversation is one you do not want to have.

But, aha! You suddenly remember that there’s something that you can say that will stop the other person in their tracks. And you begin to speak...

And that, my friends, is when you can decide not to weaponize the past. You can decide against the nuclear option, because the destruction that follows is nearly impossible to repair. This is what forgetting, as in “forgive and forget”, can really mean.

It sounds simple, right? But when you’re on my last nerve, when my anger is righteous, and I know that God agrees with me, the thought of forgiving and forgetting makes me feel like a doormat. It’s just not fair!

But, forgiveness, after all, isn’t about what’s fair. And it isn’t about who’s deserving, or right. It isn’t about condoning a harmful behavior. It isn’t about denial; spackling over a toxic system. It’s not even a get out of jail free card. Forgiveness, Nora Gallagher writes, is “a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Experiencing forgiveness will change you.**

Here’s a stanza of the hymn: *How can your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart that broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.explorefaith.org/lifeissues/why\\_forgive/forgiving\\_the\\_unforgivable.php](http://www.explorefaith.org/lifeissues/why_forgive/forgiving_the_unforgivable.php)

Who among us doesn't like to nurture a good grudge or two? After all, you never know when it will come in handy, right? But just visualize the energy that consumes.

Years ago, I was emotionally and financially betrayed by someone I loved. It was devastating. In my head, I said, "I'll be happy to forgive you...when you make an adequate apology, and acknowledge fully the wrongs you have done to me." In nourishing that resentment, I became like a hermit crab, withdrawing into my shell at the slightest provocation.

Over time, I came to realize that my anger was harming only me. I was letting that person occupy space in my head rent-free because it was the only contact with him that I had left. And I didn't want to let him go...completely. I didn't want to change; I wanted him to change.

In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.

My pious posture of "I'll forgive you, if" had no effect at all on the other person. My righteous anger and fear became a hot rock that I carried for years, showing it off to anyone who would listen. And then people stopped listening. My inability to forgive and move on had become sin.

Could I let it go? How? I wanted to forgive as I had been forgiven, but I couldn't remember what that felt like. Then, I found a story by Richard Rohr called *The Divine Pickpocket*.<sup>2</sup> Rohr reminds us that God's love for us makes sin unnecessary and takes it away. He writes.

"What do you think happens when God forgives your sin? Is it God changing suddenly, reassessing you? Is it God deciding to waive some eternal and required punishment? No! ... God does not change; we change.

"Here is what's happening in the experience of forgiveness: When God's arms are tight enough around you, when for a moment you can believe in love, when you let God gaze into your eyes deeply enough and are ready to believe it, then you're able to let God rob you of your sin. God pulls it out of your pocket while holding you in her gaze!"

My experience of God as pickpocket changed me. It freed me – to begin to rebuild my life...to begin to learn how to forgive others.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, from *Days of Renewal*.

## Forgiveness is a gift from God.

The simple but mind-blowing truth of the gospel is that God desires and dreams forgiveness for us. Forgiveness is God's go-to place. This is something we forget to remember. Do you ever get caught up in the notion that the Christian life is a matter of keeping a scorecard, in the hopes that God might find you, what, acceptable...loveable? Or that Confession, whether on Sunday morning, or privately with a priest, is about striking some sort of plea deal with God?

Confession, my dear friends, is about placing our shortcomings at the feet of a gracious God who has already forgiven us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In today's parable, the king forgives that servant a debt of ten thousand talents – an astronomical sum that could never be repaid. The servant receives forgiveness, but doesn't understand what happened to him and for him.

And in not understanding the grace that was given to him, he simply turned back to the tit for tat way of the world. Does he experience any real freedom? Does he share God's grace with those who are indebted to him? No. And in the end, the torture to which he is consigned, complete with piles of hot rocks and vats of rat poison, is a hell of his own making.

My teacher and mentor Jeffery Rowthorn, a wonderful writer of hymns, penned these powerful words.

Lord, you show us love's true measure,  
"Father, what they do, forgive."  
Yet we hoard as private treasure  
all that you so freely give.

Well, then, if we're supposed to forgive, I guess we'd better shape up, get out there and get busy forgiving, right? Not quite. Yes, there is an intimate connection between our ability to forgive others and our capacity to be forgiven; but that connection is not based in us but, as in all things, that connection is based in God.

Miroslav Volf writes, "It's so crucial to see our forgiving not simply as our own act, but as participation in God's forgiving. Our forgiving is faulty; God's forgiving is faultless. Our forgiving is provisional; God's is final. We forgive tenuously and tentatively; God forgives unhesitantly and definitively... The only way we dare forgive is by making our forgiving transparent to God's and always open to revision. After all, our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*.

Forgiveness is hard. Experiencing forgiveness will change you. Forgiveness is a gift from God. *“Forgive our sins as we forgive” you taught us, Lord, to pray; but you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.* Thanks be to God! Amen. Amen. Amen.