

“Teach me” – Matthew 18:15-22

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Let’s talk about forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of those topics that rolls around periodically in our study of the lessons Jesus taught. And it seems like we’ve heard it all when it comes to the necessity of forgiveness. But implementing forgiveness may be the hardest concept to adopt.

Speaking of forgiveness, how do cows forgive each other? They turn the udder cheek.

One day at church, a pastor delivered a sermon about the importance of forgiving your enemies. When he was a third of the way through the sermon, he said, "Raise your hand if you are now willing to forgive your enemies." Half of the people in the church raised their hands, so the pastor continued the sermon.

When he was two thirds of the way through the sermon, he said, "Raise your hand if you are now willing to forgive your enemies." Three quarters of the people in the church raised their hands, so the pastor continued the sermon.

When he was completely finished with the sermon, he said, "Raise your hand if you are now willing to forgive your enemies." All the people in the church raised their hands, except one older lady.

The pastor went to the woman and asked, "Why are you still unwilling to forgive your enemies?"

"Simple," the woman replied. "I have no enemies."

"None at all?"

"Nope."

"How is it possible that you have no enemies?"

"I’m 96. I outlived them all."

So, chalk up longevity as one of the ways to avoid forgiveness.

However, for the sake of discussion today, let’s assume we won’t outlive our enemies and will be faced with this recurring prospect of having to forgive.

I think all of us have in our heads that forgiveness must be a moment and instantaneous decision.

“I loaned you some money and you never paid me back. Ok, I forgive you.”

“You cheated on me for a long time, and it ruined our marriage. Ok, I forgive you.”

“You verbally abused me as a kid growing up, Dad. Oh well, I forgive you.”

We think that because Jesus commanded it, we should just forgive on command.

“How many times should I forgive?” Peter asked Jesus. “Seven times?”

“Nah,” Jesus said, “try seventy-seven times.” Okay. End of story. You just gotta forgive. That’s what we hear from Jesus.

We all know, though, that forgiveness is much harder and more complex than that.

We people of faith aren’t as good at forgiveness as we should be. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” is what we pray. But our pledge to forgive is not as firm as our plea to be forgiven.

Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, a clinical psychologist and professor of practical theology at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, has written extensively about forgiveness—what it is and what it isn’t.

She says, “In Christianity, especially, we are taught that we have to forgive, but we are given few, if any, practical ideas about what that means and how to do it. And frankly, a lot of what we do learn about forgiveness is toxic, especially if those lessons come from people who want to exploit it.”

For example, when the powerful weaponize the instruction to “forgive” against the oppressed and abused: Enslaved people told to simply “forgive” their captors; women told to “forgive” husbands who abused them; survivors of sexual violence told to “forgive” the church. Defining forgiveness as “moving past and forgetting harm” in these instances is hard to fathom.

In her writings, Walker-Barnes lists some myths about forgiveness, myths that we probably have embraced for ourselves more than once. I think it's helpful for us to know these myths so that we can get to the core of what forgiveness means.

The first myth is this: forgiving someone means forgetting what they've done to you. The old "forgive and forget." "Unless you have a brain lesion, trauma, or some other injury, it is impossible to forget. Generally, if an experience is painful enough to need forgiveness, then it's significant enough that it's going to be encoded into memory. You're going to remember. Forgiving is about how you remember, working to refrain from repeating the story to yourself in ways that only reinforce the negative feelings. Or, intentionally recalling a good memory of the person who wronged you. Plus, remembering can protect yourself from future harm." It's okay to forgive and remember.

The second myth about forgiveness is forgiveness means never feeling angry again about the incident. Our emotions are natural and arise naturally, like anger after we've forgiven somebody. Some hurts leave a long emotional residue. They impact us in ways that we may grieve for a lifetime, even if we are working to forgive the offender. So, forgiveness doesn't always take away the hurt.

Myth number 3: Forgiveness requires apology and reconciliation. "Forgiveness is inner work directed toward another person. But it doesn't require the offender's participation. In fact, it's often less about the offender than it is about the person who has been harmed. There's a popular saying that "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Holding onto resentment damages us, in a very real way through its impact on our nervous system. Forgiveness, then, is about releasing what holds us to the offender: our anger at them. In other words, we forgive mostly for our own sake.

"They do not have to apologize, or even recognize the harm that they caused, in order for us to forgive them (because we're doing it for ourselves). Likewise, we do not have to communicate our forgiveness to them. Forgiveness doesn't require us to be in continued relationship with the offender at all. That's the difference between forgiveness and

reconciliation. Forgiveness is about letting go; reconciliation is about restoration. We can forgive without reconciling. Sometimes that's the most we can hope for, especially if the offender remains unrepentant or unchanged."

And the last myth about forgiveness is the one that, to me, is most important to remember—especially as we're called by Jesus to forgive. And that's the myth that you either forgive or you don't.

"We often talk about forgiveness as if it is a one-time decision that, once made, is unchanging. Perhaps it works that way when a harm is relatively mild, is an isolated incident, or doesn't result in lasting injury. But when the harm is more severe, recurrent, and has lasting impact, forgiveness is more complicated. It requires healing and recovery work on our part. And that takes time.

"Forgiveness cannot be rushed and can have disastrous consequences if it is forced. It is not an event or decision, but rather a process with its own timeline. Even when we allow the process to take its course, forgiveness may not be "one and done." Sometimes we go through life changes or developmental transitions that flare up old hurt. New traumas or losses may make us remember parts of the old incident that we hadn't noticed before. We may realize there's some old resentment buried away that we still need to forgive. If we've been honest with our forgiveness work the first time, it's often easier to reach forgiveness again."

Forgiveness is a process, not an event.

When Peter goes to Jesus and asks him, "Lord, how often shall I forgive, seven times?", Jesus says "77 times." In another gospel account, Jesus tells him seventy times seven.

Someone once labeled these numbers as the ambiguous math of grace. Over and over again we are called to forgive by Jesus. Over and over again, we're called to demonstrate grace to those who have hurt us.

And just as important as this, those numbers remind us that forgiveness is not a one-time deal. And, in fact, it's a continuous process.

Again, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes eloquently puts it this way: "Part of what my Christian identity calls me to do is to decide to forgive and to be committed to the process of forgiving others as often as I possibly

can. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I will always reach whole and complete forgiveness — that's part of my humanity. The question is: Have I intentionally worked on developing a forgiving disposition?"

In asking Jesus to, in effect, teach him more about how to live in community, Peter learns about abundant grace: letting go of rigid limits and embracing the limitless possibilities of forgiveness and repair. But he also had to have learned that forgiveness is much more than declarations we make one time to those who have offended us. It's adopting an intentional disposition of forgiveness and realizing that forgiveness is a journey with a destination that might never be fully reached.

In the end though, Jesus knew better than all of us: Forgiveness repairs and restores. No matter the attitude or response of the offending party, forgiveness makes us healthier and our communities stronger.