

“Forgiveness: Why Forgive?” Rev. Heather Riggs
February 26, 2023
Tabor Heights and Montavilla United Methodist Church

John 8:1-11 Common English Bible

8 1 And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. **2** Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. **3** The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, **4** they said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. **5** In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?” **6** They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. **7** They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, “Whoever hasn’t sinned should throw the first stone.” **8** Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. **9** Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. **10** Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?” **11** She said, “No one, sir.” Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don’t sin anymore.”

Forgiveness

Every Sunday in the Lord’s prayer we pray, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,” but why?

Why does God want us to forgive?

And what does it actually mean to forgive?

As a survivor of child abuse, people,
good people,
caring people,
church people,
kept telling me that I needed to forgive my parents.

Forgive my stepmother for all the times she told me that my dead mother was looking down from heaven and was ashamed of me because I kept forgetting to turn off the lights when I left the room.

Forgive my stepmother for depriving me of adequate nutrition because she had some kind of eating disorder so she didn't want me to eat too much.

Forgive my father for the five years that he stood by and let this happen.

Forgive my father for choosing to send his 14 year old daughter to live with a relative, so he could stay with his wife.

But I was a child, and I had no idea what forgiveness was or wasn't, or how to do it, so I began to collect definitions of forgiveness.

One of my first favorites was from the Fellowship of the Ring, by J. R. R. Tolkien.

"Many who live deserve death. Many who have died deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too hasty to deal out judgment, for even the very wise cannot see all ends."

My next favorite was from the book "Christy" by Catherine Marshall.

"Real forgiveness includes total acceptance."

The context of that one was that to really forgive, we have to be willing to accept the true ugliness of what has been done. Not accept it as OK, but accept that it really happened and was not OK at all.

My next favorite piece of the forgiveness puzzle was from a counselor:

"Sometimes you first have to allow yourself to be angry in order to have something to forgive."

Most of my definitions were like that. Short phrases from books or people that, collected together, created a patchwork of what forgiveness was and wasn't and how to go about the process of forgiveness.

Many years later, I came upon this book, *The Book of Forgiving* by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu and this is my absolute favorite definition of Forgiveness (so far!) because this book puts all the pieces together into a cohesive Why, What and How of Forgiveness.

The Book of Forgiving is a collection of What Archbishop Tutu and his daughter Rev Mpho Tutu learned and practiced during the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

So this book, while easy to read, delves deep into the kind of inner work and outer work that it takes to truly heal when serious harm has been done. That's why I love it and why I am sharing this book with you during this Lent season.

So, why forgive?

Why would I even want to forgive something as awful as 5 years of insufficient nutrition, and physical, mental and emotional abuse?

Mostly because not forgiving - the anger, the resentment, and the hurt eats you up inside. It's exhausting to be angry and sad all the time.

Why Forgive?

- **A gift to ourselves**
- **Good health**
- **Heals families and communities**

Forgiveness is a gift that we give to ourselves.

Here's what that means:

For example, let's say we work in the same office.

You bought yourself a special pen. A good pen that writes in your favorite shade of dark purple that is dark enough to still be legal on forms, but just a little bit different so that you can express your individuality within the corporate monotony. And it's an expensive pen, a nice one, that someone special gave you.

Then one of your coworkers steals your pen and they won't give it back!

They say, it's just a pen, go get another one from the supply cupboard. Finders keepers! So now you're mad at them and refuse to forgive them until they give you back your pen!

This is the kind of forgiveness we are taught as children. Give back the toy, apologize and now you are forgiven, right? And that's fine, if the offender is willing to do their part! This is conditional forgiveness. I'll forgive you on the condition that you apologize and make it right.

The problem with conditional forgiveness is that if the person who harmed us refuses to meet our conditions then they can effectively hold us hostage! If I won't allow myself to forgive you until I get my pen back then I'm giving you control over my feelings, and our relationship!

So forgiveness actually gives us freedom from our perpetrator because they cannot control us by withholding what we need to do the internal work of moving forward in our lives.

- Forgiveness is a gift to ourselves.
- Forgiveness is also good for our health

There's a growing body of research on the health benefits of forgiveness and the health detriments of anger and resentment.

Forgiveness has not only been “shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connection and increase emotional self-confidence,” (loc 193) people who hold onto anger and resentment have increased rates of insomnia, high blood pressure, ulcers, migraines, backaches, heart attack and even cancer! (loc 199)

- Forgiveness is a gift to ourselves.
- Forgiveness is good for our health
- Forgiveness is also brings healing to families and communities

To return to our stolen pen scenario, It's not just the two of us who suffer during the great pen feud of 2023, it's the whole office, isn't it. Because the two of us can't work together, everyone else has to work around us, or take sides, and pretty soon it's a whole big mess! When it's just a pen, even a very special pen, sometimes we need to let it go. But when it's not just a pen... when it's ongoing abuse, or systemic racism, it's even more important that we engage in the deeper work of the path of forgiveness, which includes justice, ending the abuse, creating future safety, and reparations.

Sometimes we need to walk away from an abusive relationship. Sometimes it is vital to our safety and sanity to go no contact or low contact with people who refuse to change their behavior. Please hear me not judging you if you have had to walk away from a relationship!

As a survivor of child abuse, myself, I had to go low contact with my family of origin to protect my children and myself. Sometimes this is absolutely the best choice.

And... Especially right now, in this season of extreme political and cultural divisiveness, it's so important to learn how to have challenging conversations and still stay in relationship. All of us have both been hurt and have hurt others. All of us have needed to forgive and have needed forgiveness. Many relationships and communities can be healed when we are willing to do the work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?”

In our Bible reading today a group of men with power and leadership status bring a woman accused of adultery before Jesus, to see how Jesus would respond.

Sadly, I find this scenario all too familiar in the United Methodist Church, as Methodists argue about whether LGBTQ+ folks should be fully included in the church.

Methodists will bring a gay clergy person, like our new Bishop, or a straight clergy person like me who has officiated a marriage, and hoping to test the “orthodoxy” of my theology they ask me:

“Pastor, we caught your Bishop in the act of being gay. In the Law - in the Bible, that is, it commands us that if a man lies with another man he must be stoned. (Lev 20:13) In the Book of Discipline it says that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian Teaching.

And then, no matter how nuanced, how biblical, or how deeply theological my response is, they do not want to have a real conversation.

So get why Jesus didn't argue with those men.

I absolutely can explain theologically why I believe that LGBTQ+ folks are made in the image of God and it's not a sin to be who God made you to be. It's not hard, it's based in good solid theology that incorporates a nuanced understanding of the languages the Bible was written in, the cultural context of the people who did the writing, and the history of English Bible translations and the history of fundamentalism in America.

But there's no point in trying to dialogue with people who are really just there to try to catch you in a gotcha moment.

So I totally get why Jesus just squatted down and doodled in the dirt until their gotcha balloon deflated.

So when the energy of the crowd had deflated, Jesus completely avoided the pointless argument with people who were never going to listen by going straight to the heart of the matter.

“Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone.”

I don't think that Jesus was proclaiming judgment on this poor woman, because after everyone leaves he tells her he doesn't condemn her. Jesus knew the whole story.

Jesus knew what she had done and why, if she had actually done anything!

all of us do things that harm others and all of us have experienced harm

The point was, that this group of people who care more about the letter of the law than the spirit of Grace, needed to be reminded that all of us do things that harm others and all of us have experienced harm.

Part of being in a family,
Part of being in a community,
Part of being in a church,

Is that we will hurt one another. We will!
And it's not OK. It's not Ok to harm one another.
So we need to respond to harm with Grace.

Grace and forgiveness

- Isn't easy
- It is not forgetting
- It's not a sign of weakness, or letting the abuse win
- And It's not quick
- But, Real Forgiveness creates space for justice which leads to harm reduction and peace.

Tutu and Tutu, in *The Book of Forgiving*, describe the work of forgiveness as the Four-fold Path of Forgiveness. Next week we'll continue our journey with the path.

Throughout this book there is a set of spiritual practices that use a stone. You were invited to take a stone when you came in. Here's the first practice:

Carrying the Stone

- 1. Hold stone in your non-dominant hand**
- 2. Do not put it down till supper**
- 3. Journal**

Each week we'll have another practice involving your stone, some in worship and some in the study group, so please hang onto it.