

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
The 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
September 18, 2023 Matthew 18:21-35
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Seventy-seven times. That is how often Jesus says we are to forgive a person who has hurt us. If we don't forgive from the heart, he says that we will be subjected to torture. That may seem harsh, but it is true.

I know from experience that when I hang on to a grudge or hurt, when I nurse it and mull over it, I lose sleep, get myself twisted up into knots, and make myself miserable. When we refuse to forgive someone, when we let a wound fester—both the one wronged and the one who did wrong—are held back from the new life that is offered to us. And that is indeed a form of torture.

Another form of torture is to our physical health. John Hopkins Hospital researchers have discovered a connection between forgiveness and our physical health. "Unresolved conflict can go deeper than you may realize—the study asserts- it may be affecting your physical health. The good news: Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression and stress." Author Louis B. Smedes said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

Each of us needs to be forgiven and to offer forgiveness to others. And so I ask, Who is it that we need to forgive in our lives? Maybe there is a hurt that has been carried for many, many years that still has the power to hold us back in life. Perhaps the one who needs forgiveness has never expressed regret or is no longer living. In these cases we can still forgive, with God's help. We can turn those painful memories over to God and let them go.

Forgiveness is not an easy, one time decision, it is often a process that we need to return to again and again in prayer, even 77 times. And forgiveness does not mean that we return to situations that are dangerous to us. It does not mean that we forget that there was harm done. It does not mean that justice need not be pursued.

Christian psychologist Everett Worthington has spent his career studying the role of forgiveness after horrible abuse, as well as every day pains and slights in relationships. He notes that forgiveness requires recognition of the offense, and real grieving of the loss. And forgiveness requires courage to face the truth before bitterness and hurt can be released. Facing the truth of abuse often means that reconciliation is not possible for the safety of everyone involved.

For far too long, the Church has been complicit in cases of abuse. We have used Jesus' teaching on forgiveness to encourage people to return to their abusers, to allow those doing harm to

continue -because they apologized, and have overlooked systems that damage individuals. If this has happened to you I am so sorry.

Forgiveness never means staying in a situation where you are being mistreated. It does not mean that you allow others to take advantage of you. Author Elizabeth Esther, an abuse survivor, puts it this way: "Forgiveness means I carry no more resentment. It doesn't mean I tolerate more abuse."

Forgiveness is a pathway to healing, for ourselves, for our communities, and for the world as we let go of anger and resentment.

And we each need to consider, who have I hurt? Who do I need to ask for forgiveness? In 12 step programs, step number 8 is "made an inventory of all the persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all." Whether or not we are in recovery from alcohol or drug abuse, this step should be part of the spiritual recovery for every one of us.

And we must not forget to forgive ourselves. Perhaps even more than 77 times! Please stop beating yourself up! Give yourself the time and the grace you need to heal. Guilt can play tricks on us, convincing us that we are not worthy of love because of things done in the past. When your past chases you, shame can rise up again and again. Yes, we need to acknowledge where we were wrong, take responsibility for our actions and try to make amends, but we do not have to allow guilt and shame to hold us back from the newness of life that is offered to us in Christ.

Imagine what the world would be like if everyone took responsibility for their actions and apologized for wrongs done. Forgiveness is the road to peace and the healing of the brokenness of the world. Let us pledge to making today the start of a new commitment To being peacemakers, to forgiving ourselves and others, to making amends and asking for forgiveness from others.

Loving God, you ask us to forgive others as you have forgiven us. Give us the grace and courage to do this in a way that brings no more harm, but healing for all parties. Help us to heal the divisions in our world, bring us to your peace that passes all understanding. Amen.