

Reader 1/Jesus: If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them.

Reader 2/Narrator/Master: Then Peter said to Jesus,

Reader 3/Peter: Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?

Reader 1/Jesus: Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said,

Reader 4/Servant 1: Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.

Reader 1/Jesus: The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said,

Reader 4/Servant 1: Pay me back what you owe me.

Reader 1/Jesus: Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him,

Reader 5/Servant 2: Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.

Reader 1/Jesus: But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt. When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said,

Reader 2/Narrator/Master: You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?

Reader 1/Jesus: His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

-Common English Bible

It's not easy being human. We are so easily disappointed, hurt and wounded. We so frequently disappoint, betray, and hurt one another. Yet few of us are actively choosing to hurt or be hurt, often the greatest pain surfaces from unintended and unconscious offense, from misunderstanding, on accident. It starts early, doesn't it? Siblings often wound each other over and over and over again... sometimes carrying scars or festering wounds into adulthood. And if not siblings, how about those elementary school friends or classmates? Those relationships can leave a mark. And of course there's all the wounds that accumulate between parents and children, even between the most loving parents and children. Most of us, by the time we reach adulthood, are the walking wounded- not visibly, typically, but internally, emotionally, spiritually. And in adulthood our relationships with others can reopen our wounds— often it doesn't take much, does it?— thoughtless words or actions can set us off, certain personalities take us back... Our wounds are both the result of harm done to us in relationships and guilt over harm we've done.

Our consistent focal image for the season of Lent will be a cross. The cross is powerful symbol of wounded and broken humanity— this instrument of torture on which an innocent man suffered so intensely partially due to the betrayal, denial, and desertion of his closest relations on earth, largely due to the violent heart of humankind, violence that surely has its root in woundedness. Each week of Lent we'll add something to the cross to sharpen our focus, this week we added chains. We even had the sound of one walking in chains. I've been working thus far in this sermon with wounds as our primary metaphor, but chains are a good supplement— All the unresolved hurt that we carry with us, are heavy chains that bind us, chains that restrict our movement, limit our possibilities, and perpetuate our pain.

These chains, these wounds, these are why we need the God revealed in Jesus, why we need freeing, healing grace from a power greater than us, why we need salvation. And we hear it every week, because we need to hear it every week, we are forgiven, our chains have been unhooked, they can fall away. When I introduce the passing of the peace I often say something like this: "The amazing good news of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ brings with it a peace that passes all understanding, but we only manage to experience this peace when we find a way to live it out with one another." And ain't that the truth? If we are not able to forgive ourselves

and one another, we will not know peace; those chains won't fall away. What we don't forgive hardens in us, and hardens us, and keeps us chained and wounded. The key to healing and moving forward in freedom is the practice of forgiveness. It is true that forgiveness, unbelievably amazing and powerful forgiveness is ours in Christ, but we won't experience the full freedom granted by this gift if we fail to forgive one another and ourselves.

But we can forgive one another and ourselves. This is the gift and power given to us with the gift of the Spirit who dwells in us. It's not easy, but it's possible. It's clearly never been easy or Jesus wouldn't talk so much about it in the Gospel of Matthew. We already heard strong words about the necessity of forgiving as we have been forgiven in the sixth chapter. We've already heard an admonition to love our enemies. And now we're given a process for living into forgiveness. If you only read the first few verses about what to do when a brother or sister sins against you, perhaps you'd miss that the whole point is forgiveness. But Peter's reply makes it plain that that's what this is all about. And the parable that Jesus tells makes it even more plain.

Jesus, in verses 15-20, suggests that when we have been hurt or offended it is our responsibility to go directly to the person who has hurt or offended us, privately, to let them know how we have been hurt. I think often when we are hurt or offended we assume it is the responsibility of the one who has hurt or offended us to come and make amends to us, and we hold bitterness, grudges, chains... waiting for that to happen. We also are more likely to talk to anyone or perhaps everyone else about our hurt or offense than to the person who has hurt us. We want to feel supported and so we seek out allies. But the only person who can truly help us to release the particular pain inflicted in a personal relationship is the person who wittingly or unwittingly inflicted it. And as I suggested earlier— often the offense was unintentional and the guilty party is unaware of the resulting pain. Only a direct conversation can allow them to learn, take responsibility, and change. The point of this direct confrontation is the restoration of the relationship— being able to extend forgiveness and move forward in freedom.

Now, it takes a great deal of courage to approach one who has hurt us privately. And sometimes, particularly when power has been abused, it is not appropriate for such a one on

one conversation to take place— this could be an occasion for further wounding. I think in situations of abuse or bullying that still a direct, relatively private conversation is an important first step towards healing— but the one who has been abused need not make the approach— an advocate— in the context of the church the pastor or personnel elder— can and should do so.

That said, for most of the hurts and offenses that surface in our life together, we can follow Jesus' guidelines and we are well served to do so. A word now to those of us who may be approached by others who have been hurt by us — this is hard to hear. Our natural impulse is to deny, defend, or justify. But Jesus calls us to listen, deeply listen. Whether or not we intended the offense or hurt, this is the result of something we have said or failed to say, done or failed to do... and we need to hear this, understand it, and, if possible, learn from it. As soon as we start to deny, defend, or justify... the one wounded feels unheard and the wounds deepen. But if we can listen, we can discern what amends are needed— an apology, a change in behavior— and seek to do what we can to restore this relationship. Particularly when we are aware of a significant power differential in our relationship— if those with less power than us are willing to tell us how we have offended them— it is not ours to deny, defend, or justify — it is ours to listen and learn. EVEN if we did not intend the offense, ESPECIALLY if we did not intend the offense... we have something to learn. Sometimes our pride gets in the way — we want to explain and justify... but Jesus invites us just to listen.

If the offended one does not feel heard— perhaps because too much denial, defense, and justification went on, perhaps because they were talked over— then it is time for witnesses (in our context the pastor and personnel committee are wonderful sources for witnesses) to come alongside the offended one to ensure safe process and help foster reconciliation. If even after such a confrontation with witnesses the offending party refuses to listen, then the authority of the church can be invoked— in our case through the Session, your elected leaders — and if still there is a refusal to listen, hard boundaries and consequences may result.

I know these are hard teachings. I know that dealing directly with pain is hard work. But I also know that most of us, deep down, want to do the right thing, want to have healthy relationships, want to take responsibility when we have failed in relationship... and most of us

will find the strength to listen and change. This is the hard work of those who have hurt or offended. There's also hard work, maybe the hardest work, for ones hurt and offended— to choose to approach in love and honesty, that's hard. To believe someone when they say they are sorry and intend to change, that's hard. To forgive, hard.

But I think... even when we do all the hard work of dealing directly and honestly with one another... sometimes those who have hurt us don't listen, don't get it, don't change... and sometimes we need to establish distance and hard boundaries to be safe. Even when this happens, still we have the task of forgiveness— because what we don't release, we bind— we wrap in chains inside us, and it keeps us suffering.

Peter asks how often we have to forgive— he suggests, generously, seven times. And Jesus ups the ante— he suggests 77 times. Gah. But of course, if you're counting, you're probably not forgiving— you're waiting for the next offense... keeping score. As two scholars put it, "Whoever counts has not forgiven at all but is only biding his or her time. The kind of forgiveness called for is beyond all calculation" (Boring and Craddock, 76).

That's what Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates. A servant is forgiven an unfathomably large debt, the largest number imaginable at the time, equivalent to 165,000 years of day wages, he's forgiven all this by her master after appealing for mercy and then turns around and demands repayment of a much smaller debt (equal to a 100 days of labor) from a fellow servant, and shows no mercy when appealed to in the way she herself had appealed. The consequence for her is unfathomably awful— forced to suffer until the debt that can't be repaid is repaid.

Matthew makes an allegory of this story, every element in it a symbol for something else— suggesting the master stands in for God, the debt is sin, the first servant one forgiven an enormous debt of sin by God, the second servant one who has committed an 'ordinary' sin against a fellow human being or fellow Christian. This is a problematic interpretation of Jesus' story because it suggests God can withdraw the gift of forgiveness... the story is powerful enough without going there. If the master or king is just a human authority who reneges on his original, gracious forgiveness, it illustrates powerfully how awful it is to fail to forgive as God forgives.

Though Matthew, more than once, appears to make God's forgiveness conditional—the nature of grace is that it is free and unconditional. All of us have been forgiven more than 77 times by God, we have been forgiven on an unimaginable scale. This is just true. But as I have already suggested more than once in this sermon, we won't experience that gift of forgiveness if we do not live it. The chains can be unhooked, but they will not fall away. But when we invest in the hard work of accountable, person to person relationships, in which we forgive daily, again and again and again... we live into a freedom and a wholeness beyond our wildest dreams. And church is a place to practice this so that we can live it in our daily lives in the world. May it be so.

Sources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004.

The insight about our inclination "to deny, defend, and justify" is credited to Pete Steinke, though I did not read it and do not know its original source. It was taught to me by a ministry coach. A helpful summary of one of his important books can be found here: http://rockhay.tripod.com/cohort/Congregational_Leadership_in_Anxious_Times.pdf