

A Courageous Life: Courage to Forgive  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 18:21-35  
Welborne UMC ~ September 17, 2017  
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Courage. It took courage for Peter to ask the question. In Matthew's Gospel, this scripture happens shortly after the Transfiguration, when Jesus is transformed into a heavenly figure while on a mountain with Peter, James and John. Following this revealing event, Jesus has been teaching the disciples about the importance of welcoming children, how much God seeks after one lost sheep, and how to handle conflict in the community. In other words, he's been giving them some pretty important lessons. A lot to absorb. Then Peter takes it a step further: "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as SEVEN times? (Matthew 18:21, emphasis added)"

Oh, Peter. That's a courageous question, but if only it were that easy, Jesus says. Let's try seventy seven times, or seven times seventy seven (translations of the Greek here differ). Let's try a LOT more than seven! Forgiveness should be countless.

When we are teaching toddlers about forgiveness, we begin by teaching them to accept someone else's "I'm sorry" in the moment. I'm sorry for taking your toy. I'm sorry for butting ahead of you in line. I'm sorry that we are out of chicken nuggets and you have to have spaghetti for lunch. As adults, we know that is the easy stuff. The real work of forgiveness—the courageous work of forgiveness—is not just a moment. It is a journey.

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012 -- an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him.

But then she made the choice to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors," she told *The Forgiveness Project*. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then became a process." At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world.<sup>1</sup>

That's the courageous part of forgiveness. That's why Jesus says it has to happen over and over and over. Forgiveness may begin with a choice—but it does not end there. For most situations and for most of us, forgiveness is a lifelong process. That's why it requires so much courage—truly forgiving means that we are going to be working on a tender place in our hearts for the rest of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> "Forgiveness Fitness," [www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com), retrieved 9/12/17.

The process of truly forgiving also transforms us. The researchers behind The Forgiveness Project have documented this over and over again. I shared a link to The Forgiveness Project on our Facebook page last week. The Forgiveness Project, which began in 2004, is an organization that seeks to share the stories of people who have been harmed in some way, and choose to respond to that harm with a journey of restoration and healing, not with revenge.

The stories on this website are powerful. They share common themes of how building empathy, creating bridges of understanding, cultivating courage, and moving beyond resentment can transform anger and a desire for revenge into the work of reconciliation. Researchers have also documented that working through forgiveness can bring healing and hope—and avoid us falling into the trap of the unforgiving servant.

The unforgiving servant—let’s call him Sam—is the subject of the story that Jesus tells following his declaration that forgiveness is a long process. In the story, there is a king who wished to settle his accounts with his servant—Sam. Sam couldn’t pay his debts, so the king ordered he be sold. Sam begged for patience and mercy, and promised he would pay. The king had compassion and forgave his debts.

And then Sam runs into a fellow slave who owed him a pittance compared to what he owed the King. We think—oh! Sam will have learned his lesson. He will have compassion and mercy. But no. Even after his friend pleads and begs, Sam has him thrown into prison. Now, we know it is difficult for anything to happen in secret, so of course, Sam’s other servant friends heard about this and they go tell the merciful, compassionate king—who reaches the end of his mercy and compassion. Sam is handed over to be punished until he can pay his debt.

What does this have to do with us? Jesus follows up the story by talking right to us: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35). You see, Jesus knows that the failure to forgive creates a sort of acidic feeling inside of us that just eats away at us over time. In fact, biologically, the failure to forgive leaves us with a chemical reaction in our bodies known as “the stress response.” Stanford scholar Dr. Fredric Luskin explains that this stress response happens “when adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine enter the body.... Those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving ... over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim.”<sup>2</sup> But, when you courageously choose to enter a process of forgiveness, you counteract those chemicals, and they disappear, literally restoring you to emotional health.

Jesus isn’t just inviting an idealized Christian response to being victimized. Jesus knows that the failure to forgive will eat away at our very souls. He models that with his words on the cross to those who kill him—“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The invitation that Jesus gives us today is to join him on the journey of forgiveness. Is it hard? Yes. It is easier to hold grudges, to be angry, to not deal with this difficult, difficult stuff. But. We have all—all—sinned against God. We have all done things that we know are wrong. And our loving God forgives us. This is where our journey begins—knowing that we have been forgiven, in order that we might forgive.

I want to invite you this morning to think about whom you need to forgive. That might be an individual. It might be a group. Our world right now has a strong narrative of vengeance, from differences in our convictions about race, to differences in our experience of life among different generations, to differences in how we understand poverty—I could go on. We all saw that vengeance on display yesterday here in our city. We know—we know—it tears at the very fabric of our common life. We also know that Christ calls us to a different way. May we follow where he leads us.