

Sermon, September 17, 2023
Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35
“The Journey Begins: How Many Times?”
Rev. Nikki Baker, Lead Pastor



The Path of Wisdom

In our reading from the Old Testament, Exodus, at the Pastor’s Bible Study this week, we all agreed that the end of the story was somewhat problematic for us...especially in light of who Jesus teaches us to be. On the one hand, Pharaoh and his people had oppressed the Israelites for years. They had enslaved the Israelite people, made their lives unbearable, killed their children, and forbidden them from leaving to worship God. On the other hand, Scripture, each time that Pharaoh started to allow the people to go, “hardened Pharaoh’s heart,” causing him to retract his release. Even after God had struck down the firstborn of Egypt and taken the Pharaoh’s own son, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened again, and he pursued the Israelites as God made a way for them to escape through the middle of the Red Sea. In the end, Pharaoh and his army die as they are stranded and stuck in the seabed, the walls of water are released, and they all drown. The Israelites stand on the shore and sing because God has delivered them. We find ourselves disturbed by Pharaoh’s demise—and are offended by the way God destroys. Indeed, the passage is problematic, especially when we read it this week alongside Jesus’ parable. An Article in the Jewish Chronicle written about ten years ago helped me a bit:



Maybe the dramatic image of the sea splitting is the actual metaphor for this dichotomy. The two shores of the sea represent the two sides of the story. And we must pass through the middle, preserving and valuing life, yet not drowning in war and hate. The middle path between justice and mercy is a difficult one to tread and at any moment, we can be washed away.

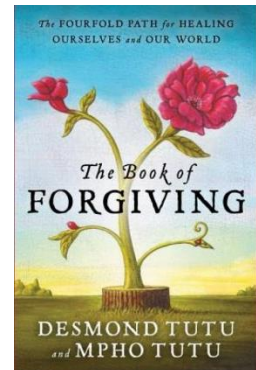
I think we are meant to follow the path of the Israelites, in God's Hands, into the sea. They "walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; with the waters like a wall to the right and left of them" (Exodus 14:29). Sephardic

Jewish Philosopher, Maimonides called this middle path, "the path of the wise" (Hilchot Deot 1:4). Tread carefully and try not to get too wet. (<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/why-did-we-sing-when-the-egyptians-drowned-1.54039>)

The path of forgiveness is the path of the wise. Forgiveness is not forgetting, it is not weakness, nor is it a subversion of justice. Forgiveness is work—it is not easy work, but it is work that bears good fruit.

Who Needs Forgiveness?

In *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who co-authored the book with his daughter Reverend Mpho Tutu, says this about forgiveness and who needs it:



There are days when I wish I could erase from my mind all the horrors I have witnessed. It seems there is no end to the creative ways we humans can find to hurt each other, and no end to the reasons we feel justified in doing so.

There is also no end to the human capacity for healing. In each of us there is an innate ability to create joy out of suffering, to find hope in the most hopeless of situations, and to heal any relationship in need of healing.

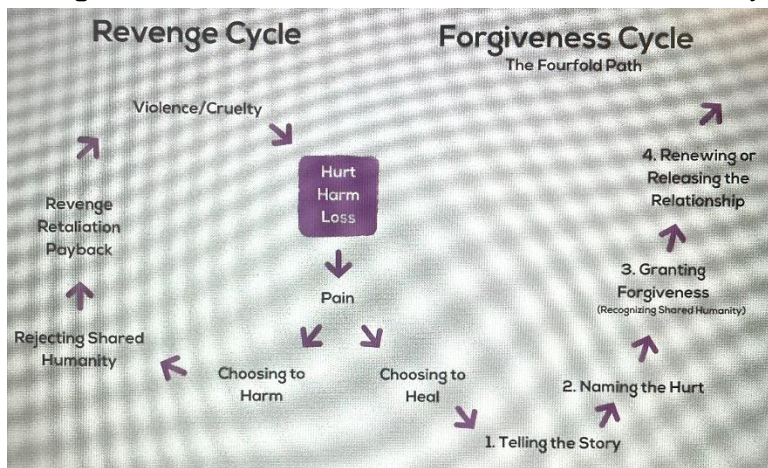
I would like to share with you two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness. When you can see and understand that we are all bound to one another—whether by birth, by circumstance, or simply by our shared humanity—then you will know this to be true. I have often said that in South Africa, there would be no future without forgiveness. Our rage and our quest for revenge would have been our destruction. This is as true for us individually as it is for us globally.

There have been times when each and every one of us has needed to forgive. There have also been times when each and every one of us has needed to be forgiven. And there will be many times again. In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again.

Whether it is the tormentor who tortured me brutally, the spouse who betrayed me, the boss who passed me over for a promotion, or the driver who cut me off during my morning commute, I face the same choice: to forgive or to seek revenge. We face this choice of whether or not to forgive as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a deeply connected world.

The quality of human life on our planet is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions with one another. Each time we help, and each time we harm, we have a dramatic impact on our world (*The Book of Forgiving*, Harper One, 2015, p. 3).

The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop of Cape Town, the Primate of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, and the Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission died December 26, 2021 having seen the release of Nelson Mandela, the end of apartheid, and paving a way for healing to begin through the fourfold path of forgiveness in South Africa. His daughter, Mpho, has her own story with work on forgiveness, and she continues this transformative work today.



When we look at the choice we have to retaliate or forgive, this graphic is helpful in understanding how the cycles of revenge and forgiveness work.

Regardless of the path we choose to walk, the path generally begins with hurt, harm, or loss that puts us in a place of pain. We are wounded, and we stand at a crossroads with a choice to make. Which cycle will we engage?

If we enter the Revenge Cycle, we move from our own pain to choosing to cause pain to the one who caused it in us. In ancient times, this was the law of talion or in Latin, *lex talionis*, “An eye for an eye.” Originally, the law was made to discourage people from exacting disproportionate vengeance for offenses committed against them by fellow citizens or equals. Jesus reinterprets and broadens this law from the Hebrew Covenant and Holiness codes, in Matthew 5, stating that we are to respond without violence to those who have caused us personal harm or injury, and he presses even further to say that we are to love our enemies.

Archbishop Tutu gives this explanation to Jesus’ reinterpretation, “If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact that you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain.”

When we follow the path of revenge, we reject our shared humanity. When we make the one we want to retaliate against less than human—a monster, undeserving of grace, we sever our connection as fellows on a life journey. And when we retaliate, take revenge or give a payback, we enter a place of violence, ourselves, becoming that which we originally repudiated in the other. And so the cycle fuels itself.

In contrast, choosing the path of forgiveness brings about a different fruit—the fruit of healing. The path of forgiveness makes space for the story to be shared, the hurt to be named, the injured to grant forgiveness and acknowledge the humanity they share with the other, and either renew or release the relationship.

Jesus and Forgiveness

Our Gospel lesson today is an illustration of both cycles of forgiveness and revenge. The first slave is called to account, but the king, instead of demonstrating patience so that the slave can pay his debt, demonstrates extravagant generosity and forgiveness by cancelling the debt altogether. We would expect this slave to be relieved, joyful, celebratory, and humble in recognition of the punishment he escaped by the grace of the King. Instead, when the slave stood at the crossroads with a fellow slave, he chooses to enter the cycle of Revenge. The forgiven slave is unable to see himself in his fellow slave. It seems that he forgets that he had an even larger debt but was completely forgiven. Instead, he chooses to enter a place of violence with his fellow slave. In this parable, Jesus reminds us that all have had a time in which we've needed to be forgiven and all have had a time in which we have needed to forgive. Retaliation doesn't relieve our pain, it masks it. When we retaliate, we fail to reconnect with the one who caused us harm or loss in the first place. We simply pave over the empty space with a feeling of satisfaction that they are feeling the same pain we felt. Now there are two people in a cycle of pain and no one is experiencing wholeness.

Forgiveness as a Spiritual Practice

Peter came to Jesus with the question, "How many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

First, Peter approaches Jesus to ask about someone he considers a brother—someone in Peter's family or close enough to be considered family. Peter wasn't asking about someone on the outside or someone who wasn't part of his cadre. He wanted to know how many times he should forgive someone within his community. Second, he asks up to

seven times? In Hebrew, seven was a number of completion and wholeness. The world was created in six days and the seventh made it complete as God rested. Peter was asking Jesus, should I forgive completely? Jesus upped the ante...he said we should forgive seven times seventy—our forgiveness should be wholly complete—forgive absolutely, fully, entirely, perfectly.

In the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*, author, theologian and pastor, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun includes forgiveness as a spiritual practice—a habit that we form to help us live out our faith more fully. She says,

"Forgiveness is not a human idea—it's God's. Forgiveness is also an entirely new way of being human. It is Jesus' way of being human. Jesus enters a world of wrongdoing with a heart that is open to love and forgive over and over again. Seventy times seven. Forgiveness is the lynchpin that makes relationships work. And it's a lot different than pretending everything is fine when you feel stabbed in the heart and trust is down the toilet.

True forgiveness is more than a high ideal. It is a costly, heartrending process that refuses to ignore or minimize wrongdoing. It places blames. It condemns the wrong. But it also gives the wrongdoer a gift. Forgiveness separates wrongdoers from their wrong by refusing to label them as *all bad*. It refuses to add this one injustice to the injustice done to them."



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Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

The only way to get better at forgiveness is to practice it. At every encounter of hurt, harm, and loss, we stand with the choice to enter the cycle of revenge or the cycle of forgiveness. So, learning to forgive will be wobbly and messy. But the fruit that will grow will be freedom from hatred, revenge and bitterness. It will be an attitude of mercy and compassion and a heart like Jesus', it will be healing and mending in ourselves and in the relationships we choose to reconcile.



The song that Dan sang for us today is by Matthew West. There is a story behind this song. You can find it on You Tube.” Matthew West-Story behind the Song “Forgiveness.” A woman, Renee, from Sarasota, Florida shared her story with Matthew West because she wanted this story of forgiveness and redemption to be heard. Renee was the mother of four. Two of her four were twin daughters. One night on her way home from the beach one night with a friend when their car was struck by a drunk driver and both Renee’s daughter, Megan and her friend were killed. The 24-year-old driver, Eric, was sentenced to 22 years in prison. Renee reached out to Eric in prison and forgave him. She began to travel to high schools and all over the US to talk about the dangers of drunk driving and share her story. Meanwhile, Eric shared that he could not even forgive himself and he could not imagine how Renee had forgiven him. Through Renee’s forgiveness, Eric found hope and redemption. Later, all of Renee’s family reached out and forgave Eric, as well. They considered him a part of their family. Renee went so far as to go to the courts to have Eric’s sentence halved so that he might have a second chance at life and join her in her sharing about the dangers of drunk driving.

I cannot imagine the devastation and loss that Renee must have felt. Nor can I imagine the devastation of knowing that my actions had killed another human being. I cannot imagine going from the life I lead now to serving a 22-year prison sentence either. One poor choice then devastation—whole lives being reduced to dust.

This isn’t just a story about forgiveness. This is real life experience of the way practicing forgiveness connects our heart to the heart of God and transforms people. A real-life experience of the dry dust of devastation that got drenched in forgiveness and new life busted through the hard-packed ground. Nobody said what Renee did was easy. Nobody promised that forgiveness is easy. But she committed to it and God’s work by the power of the Holy Spirit allowed her and her family to acknowledge and extend the grace that they have been given—they recognized that through God’s grace, they shared the same need as Eric.



Prayer Before the Prayer

I want to invite us all to consider how we might, as individuals and as a body, engage in the practice of forgiveness. Is there someone we need to ask for forgiveness? If so, what is keeping us from acting? How might we take one step forward this week? Is there someone we need to forgive? How might we move toward Christ’s example in the coming days? Every time we forgive, we make space in the world for new life to spring up, in us and in our communities. How

many times should we forgive those who have the most power to hurt us? Completely, entirely, fully—
seventy times seven.

Getting into position to do this hard work is not easy. It isn't a posture we can just leap into. It takes a little
stretching first...intentional preparation, if you will.

So I would invite you into a prayer before the prayer found at the beginning of the *Book of Forgiving*:

*I want to be willing to forgive
But I dare not ask for the will to forgive
In case you give it to me
And I am not yet ready
I am not yet ready for my heart to soften
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again
Not yet ready to see that there is humanity in my tormentor's eyes
Or that the one who hurt me may also have cried
I am not yet ready for the journey
I am not yet interested in the path
I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness
Grant me the will to want to forgive
Grant it to me not yet but soon*

*Can I even form the words
Forgive me?
Dare I even look?
Do I dare to see the hurt I have caused?
I can glimpse all the shattered pieces of that fragile thing
That soul trying to rise on the broken wings of hope
But only out of the corner of my eye
I am afraid of it
And if I am afraid to see
How can I not be afraid to say
Forgive me?*

*Is there a place we can meet?
You and me
The place in the middle
The no man's land
Where we straddle the lines
Where you are right
And I am right too
And both of us are wrong and wronged
Can we meet there?
And look for the place where the path begins
The place that ends when we forgive
Amen.*