

SPIRITUAL HEALTH: THE MATH OF FORGIVENESS

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September 13, 2020, Rally Sunday

Text: Psalm 26:1–8

This Sunday we begin a new church year, and it will prove to be an exciting one: Later this month, we will be voting to call a Lead Minister to join the clergy team. We have a new Director of Operations joining the staff. We are working to move the playground to a safer area. We are figuring out to keep the Food Shelf clients safe and warm. We are finding new ways for our church community to stay connected, all while we continue to offer worship services online, educational opportunities and children and youth programming. We are doing all this amid a continued global pandemic, a national election that looms large and community unrest. Yes, my friends this will be an exciting year!

So, what better way to approach a new beginning than to talk about forgiveness? When it comes to relationships, the text that Seth read is perhaps the most important. As we start a new church year, how wonderful would it be to start with a clean slate?

In our text, Peter asks a question that is also our question: about the limits of forgiveness. He asks Jesus how many times he should forgive others. He offers a guess. How about seven times? What we don't know is that Peter thinks he is being generous. Peter has done his math. Scholars think that Peter was misinterpreting the first part of the book of Amos, where God forgives people three times for the same offense but not four times. Peter took the three, doubled it and added one for good measure and came up with the perfect number: seven.

Jesus responded, "No! Seventy-seven times." Jesus was using the number seventy-seven to say that it's not about the number. He is inviting Peter to consider not putting limits on forgiveness because God has not put limits on forgiveness toward us. Then Jesus tells a parable. And it is a troubling parable.

It starts with a ruler who is offended by a subject, a servant, who owes ten thousand talents, which back in the day was the largest number used in everyday math and the largest number used in financial dealings. In other words, this person owed the ruler everything. So, the subject begged forgiveness and the ruler forgave the debt.

Then in the same scene, the servant goes forth from the grace of forgiveness and sees somebody who owes him a hundred talents, not ten thousand. He comes down hard on him. He grabs him by the neck. We are surprised by his reaction since recently he had been so lavishly forgiven.

When the ruler hears of this lack of forgiveness on the part of the servant, the ruler imprisons him and our text says "tortures" him until he can pay his debt. There is another sermon in that sentence alone . . . for another time.

But if you put a person who owes money in jail, you lessen the chance for repayment. And torturing them would even make it more impossible. I invite you to suspend the literal understanding and hear it as a parable.

When one does not respond with forgiveness, we are imprisoned by our own bitterness, anguish and despair. It can feel like torture. We are punishing ourselves when we cut ourselves off from the free flow of God's grace. We are hurting ourselves when we don't forgive others. It is not the person who needs our forgiveness who has the most difficult time. We do.

Here is where the math of forgiveness comes in, and it's *math*, not *path*. If you forgive a person who has wronged you, even in unspeakable ways, there comes into your life an addition that will come in no other way. It is called grace. Grace is the undeserved love and mercy of God. The only people who can extend grace are those who know that grace has been extended to them. Only those who have had to wrestle with forgiving people they don't want to forgive but who find a way to do so will expand. They expand with love and grace. When we don't forgive, our lives subtract. We become smaller and smaller, shriveled by bitterness and hurt. It stunts our relationships.

Many of you will remember the book *The Road Less Traveled*, by Scott Peck. He wrote that unless we can at least move toward the work of forgiving the person, even the person who does not deserve our forgiveness, there will not be mental health. I would add that there will not be spiritual health either.

There is a true story about a man who had a little sliver of land in downtown Boston that separated two lots he did not own. He tried to sell it because he knew the neighbors on each side would be interested. But neither one could buy at a price that he wanted. So he got angry. Harsh words were said. He stubbornly built a building about the size of our church aisle between his neighbors and lived in it. Years later, after he died, people called it The House of Spite.

We live a narrower life when we are unwilling to forgive another person. There is a gravestone in an Atlanta cemetery where a woman had inscribed on the tomb of her adulterous husband, "Gone, but not forgiven." What good does it do to carry to the grave an unforgiving heart?

The math of forgiveness begins when we understand how much God has given us grace, and how much we liberate ourselves and others when we extend that grace even to those who don't deserve it.

In 2016, during the trial of a white supremacist who massacred nine people in their church during a Bible-study gathering, some of the survivors and family members who spoke forgave him. Because this was explicitly a racially motivated killing, there was concern that forgiveness interfered with accountability for the horrific consequences of white supremacy culture.

In this tragic incident, their faith tradition provided the foundation that enabled family members to forgive; they began the process of healing that cannot occur if resentment or revenge is allowed to take root. It would have consumed them as they sought to regain their lives and adapt to the new reality of loss. Their ability to forgive did not lessen the injustice or diminish the need for the perpetrator to make amends. Their ability to forgive changed them and allowed for healing to begin.

In our Congregationalist tradition, we do not speak much about redemption and grace. We reject the notion of original sin while recognizing that we all have a capacity for good and evil. And when evil and misfortune strike, we step up, offering each other comfort and support.

For us, our covenant binds us and holds us accountable to each other. Recently, I think we have forgotten that. We have had a couple of challenging years where feelings have been hurt. Harsh words were said. Can we forgive each other and let those hard feelings go? Even when we or others fail, can we stop being suspicious and gossipy and, instead, assume the best in each other? When we make mistakes—and we

will—can we recommit to our covenant and begin again in love? Let us work to repair relationships. Let us re-enter that sacred space of covenant, of fellowship, of commitment to love and to doing the larger work that can only be accomplished together. Can we take that forgiveness into our community?

As Desmond Tutu reminded us, remaining in a state of anger and resentment locks a person in a state of victimhood making [the person] almost dependent on the perpetrator. He said, “if you can find it in you to forgive then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator.” This changes how you tell your story. I think it allows for a transformation from victim to survivor. In this church, let us be survivors.

It is not an easy path. It is not easy math. That is how forgiveness works. When we forgive each other, we don't change each other but ourselves. We liberate ourselves from the burden of bitterness. This doesn't reverse the past. It doesn't remove the past hurt, the wrongdoing or even the crime. But it changes the present and the future. It opens the possibility for spiritual health. Let's start this new church year with a clean slate. Let lean into being a forgiven people bathed in God's grace. Let us be people who easily forgive. May it be so. Amen.