

**WHEN RELATIONSHIPS GO SOUTH:
FORGIVE
MATTHEW 18:15-35; 26:28
JANUARY 20, 2013**

Our daughter Anna call asking for help with a flat tire.

She had gone to get her hair cut.

When she got out of her car she could hear the air leaking out
and new it would be flat in no time,
so she called me.

I wanted to talk her through it on the phone after she got her haircut.

She's a big girl,

I'd shown her how to do it before,
and it would be good for her to have the experience.

Besides, I was busy with something in the office,
and I really didn't want to interrupt my work flow.

Then Jill gave me a call, and drew out my better self.

I left the office, drove over to Anna's car,
and changed the tire in just a few minutes.

Yes, I know what you're thinking.

But have you never been in a situation when you knew the right thing to do,
and you just didn't want to do it?

Shall I ask your husband? Your wife?

Can't think of anything?

Let me suggest one for you.

Are you quick to forgive a wrong done to you?

A wrong that really mattered?

Jesus asks you, no, actually he commands you, to forgive those who have done wrong to you.

Is forgiving one of those things you're eager to do?

When the wrong they did to you really matters, when the hurt is deep,
are you good at forgiving?

Might you be carrying around

a little bit of something against someone even now?

William Willimon is a United Methodist pastor and recently retired as a bishop.

Despite being a bishop, he's written some really good stuff.

He wrote:

"The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion.

Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities.

It is natural for the human animal to defend itself,

to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked,

to howl when wronged,

to bite back when bitten.

Forgiveness is not natural.

It is not a universal human virtue."

He went on to make the point that forgiveness IS, however, a divine command.

Let's take a look at how this came up when Jesus was talking to his first followers.

MATTHEW 18:15-20

Someone has wronged you, said or done something wrong, hurt your feelings.

What do you usually do?

Go tell someone else about it, right?

Recruit an ally.

Better yet, recruit allies, plural.

It's how we move into a subtle war of moral and spiritual dimensions.

You did me wrong,

so I am morally and spiritually superior to you,

and I want others to know it.

So you go out to tell others what that person did to you and recruit allies.

No, Jesus says you go not to others, but to the person who sinned against you.

Go to them and try to work it out.

Because the point is not to win a war,

but to reconcile a broken relationship, to rebuild it.

If that doesn't work,

and if it's someone from the church, a brother or sister in Christ,

you take someone else from the church,

someone who is spiritually mature and won't take sides unnecessarily,

and go back to try to work it out.

It is all about trying to work it out,

to bring healing to the relationship.

In the end, Jesus says,

if they refuse to listen,

if they will not make a move toward you,

if they act like politicians in Washington, D. C.,

“treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Now, many people read that as saying, “Turn your back on them,” or “Kick them out!”

But let me ask you:

Is that how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors?

Well, how did he treat pagans and tax collectors?

He didn't give approval to wrong behaviors or bad attitudes.

But he also didn't cut himself off from them.

He didn't pretend they were in his inner circle.

But he loved them.

He sought to connect with them.

He always kept an open door, inviting them to come to him.

We know that one of his first followers was Matthew the tax collector,

Matthew whose Gospel is the only Gospel

to report this teaching of Jesus.

I suspect Matthew treasured these words of Jesus.

How do we treat the pagans and tax collectors of our day?

The guy in your workplace with the foul mouth.

The neighbor who has a loud drinking party at his house every Saturday night,
making your Sunday mornings a little tougher.

The one in the PTA or the band boosters whose values are clearly not ours.

The gossip who spread hurtful lies about you.

How do you treat the ex-wife or ex-husband who hurt you so deeply?

How do you treat the pagans and tax collectors in your life?

Do you show them Christ-like grace and love?

Do you have a spirit of judgment
or a spirit of forgiveness toward them?

Now, to have a fruitful conversation about forgiveness,

it's important to be clear about what forgiveness is not and what it is.

Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Deep hurts can rarely be wiped out of one's awareness.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation.

Reconciliation is putting the relationship back together,
and that takes two people.

Reconciliation requires that the one who did wrong does a U-turn,
as we talked about last week.

But an injured party can forgive an offender even without reconciliation.

Forgiveness is not condoning the bad action.

Forgiveness does not say bad or hurtful behavior is OK.

Forgiveness is not dismissing.

Forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously,
not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.

Forgiveness IS a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense.

It says, "What you did was wrong and hurtful.

But I will not hold this against you.

I will not carry a grudge or seek revenge.

I let go of all those dark thoughts and feelings toward you."

Peter seemed to understand what Jesus was saying about how to treat pagans and tax collectors,
because he went on to ask about how often we are to forgive others.

MATTHEW 18:21-22

Peter thought he was being really gracious and generous.

The rabbis commonly taught you should forgive three times.

After that, if they do you wrong, turn and walk away.

Peter came up with a more generous number, a more biblical number.

Forgive seven times,

seven being a number commonly used to symbolize divine completion.

And he was probably feeling pretty proud of himself.

Until Jesus came out with his answer.

Forgive seventy-seven times.

Some translations say seventy times seven, some say seventy-seven times.

It's a way of saying you just keep forgiving,

over and over and over again,

without any finish line.

You are never done forgiving.

And then, to illustrate and press the point, Jesus told a parable.

MATTHEW 18:23-35

He had been forgiven a huge debt,

one so large that he could never pay off,

despite his desperate claim that he would do so.

But he refused to forgive much smaller debts owed to him.

Those closing words haunt me.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you
unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Wow.

Does that mean we earn our forgiveness by forgiving others?

Or we forfeit our forgiveness if we don't forgive others?

I think what Jesus is getting at is this:

The heart that is not open to give grace to another

is a heart that is also not open to receive grace from God.

If our heart will not offer forgiveness to one who wronged us

our heart is not in any condition to receive the forgiveness offered us by God.

I don't think God withholds grace;

I think we can't receive it.

I think.

At any rate, Jesus made the point loud and clear that we **MUST** forgive those who do us wrong.

It is not an option, not a suggestion, not a nice idea.

It is a command.

And our response to his command has serious spiritual implications.

Do you think that to forgive someone who has done you wrong is too difficult a thing to do?

Is it too much to ask?

Consider what Jesus did for you.

When he was at the table with his followers for the last time,

knowing his crucifixion was coming,

he shared the Passover meal with them.

In the midst of the traditional Jewish celebration of God setting free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt,

Jesus took a cup of wine,

gave thanks to the Father,

and gave it to his followers with these words.

"This is my blood of the new covenant,

poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt.26:28)

His blood poured out,

his life surrendered to a tortuous death on the cross,

so that you and I could be forgiven.

Forgiven.

Forgiven, and forgiven, and forgiven, 70 times 7, without end.

His is a love that knows no bounds,

was willing to pay any price,

that never gives up on anyone

until they breathe their last breath.

It's like the love an old man had for his little spotted dog.

The dog was a mixture of spaniel, collie, terrier and dachshund, a real street-bred mutt.

But the old man loved him because the dog was his.

They were constant companions, going everywhere and doing everything together.

Every night the dog slept at the foot of the old man's bed.

Then one day the dog disappeared.

He was playing in the yard one moment,

and the next moment he was gone.

The old man searched everywhere for him,

Up and down streets and into allies,

talking to neighbors and veterinarians and posting signs everywhere,

for weeks calling the dog's name everywhere he went,

but the dog was nowhere to be found.

Finally his neighbors and friends convinced him that

there was no use in looking anymore.
 Surely the dog is dead, they said,
 hit by a car, no doubt, and crawled off by himself to die.
 Still, every night, before bed,
 he went out on the porch and called out the dog's name at the top of his voice.
 This went on for several months.
 The neighbors were certain that the old man had lost his mind.
 And then one night, as the old man was calling his name,
 the little spotted dog came home.
 The old man never knew where he had been
 or what caused him to stay away so long,
 but he was very glad that he had never stopped calling his name.

That is a faint picture of Christ's love for you.

 Knowing no bounds, going to any and all lengths, never giving up... on you.
 I think sometimes part of our difficulty in forgiving others is,
 we don't realize how great is the forgiveness that has been given to us.
 Perhaps because we don't realize the depth of our sins.
 The movie *Amazing Grace* chronicles William Wilberforce
 as he seeks to end the British transatlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century.
 Wilberforce had made an earlier visit to his old pastor and friend John Newton.
 Newton was a former captain of a slave ship prior to his conversion to Christ.
 Wilberforce was hopeful that Newton would give an account of his slave-ship days.
 Newton, however, refused to do so,
 because the experience and the "20,000 ghosts"
 haunted him too greatly.
 When he was near success in ending the slave trade in England,
 Wilberforce visited Newton and discovered that he had written his account.
 His eyesight now gone, John Newton said to Wilberforce,
 "You must use it. Names, records, ship records, ports, people.
 Everything I remember is in here.
 Although my memory is fading,
 I remember two things very clearly:
 I'm a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior."

None of you were slave traders.

And you're probably not guilty of raping, pillaging and stealing.
 But you are guilty of treason against the King of kings and Lord of lords.
 Every one of us is guilty of rebellion against the Ruler of the universe.
 Every time we ignore him, neglect him, disobey him,
 whenever we step just a little bit out of his will.
 Guilty... of treason against our Lord.
 As guilty as John Newton, the slave trader.
 As guilty as those who maneuvered to have Jesus executed.
 Yet, in the same moment, we are forgiven.

If Jesus went so far to love you and forgive your sins,
 (and you know the deeds, the words, and even thoughts he has forgiven you)
 how can you *withhold* forgiveness from someone who has
 done something infinitely less serious against you?

I would also tell you, as a word of encouragement, that
 when you forgive someone you will find *yourself* set free.
 Set free from carrying the load of feelings of offense,
 set free from the grudge,

set free from the desire for vengeance.

You will find that the heart that let go of all that and offered grace to the offender
is the same heart that now freely *receives* the forgiving grace of God.

And you'll be free.

So who might you need to forgive... today?