

“Seventy-Seven Times!”
Matthew 18:21-35

Prayer: Let your spirit of grace flow through us, O God, as we reflect on this difficult and challenging passage from Matthew. Give us the ears to listen and a heart willing to change. Amen.

Have you heard of the saying, "bury the hatchet?" A hatchet, as you know, is used as a weapon of war and as a tool that can inflict considerable damage if used to maim or kill an opponent. "Bury the hatchet" is a phrase we borrowed from our sisters and brothers in the native circle. The term comes from an Iroquois ceremony in which war axes or other weapons were literally buried in the ground as a symbol of newly made peace; that the hostilities between the warring tribes were over, buried for ever. It means "restoring peace in the community," "forgiving each other," and "starting over again."

Unfortunately, hatchets are still around and sometimes we carry them from time to time. Perhaps some of us have one in our pockets this morning. But they don't look exactly like a bladed tool or an axe. No— these hatchets I'm talking about come in different shapes and forms-but they are hatchets none-the-less. They are weapons like resentment, or grudges, or hatred, or anger, or revenge, or bitterness that we are tempted to take up and strike back when someone hurts us. Every one of these hatchets comes up handy from time to time when someone has hurt us badly with their words or actions or an episode in life such as death or broken relationships or loss of a job that stirs our emotions to hatred and rage. And we raise our hatchets to say, "I'll never get over what that person did to me. I'll never ever forgive." Using a hatchet of anger, we cut someone off from us as a means of punishment or revenge. Ever had a conversation that gets a little heated up and the other person opens up something from the past, you know, reaches down and grabs some old hatchet you thought was buried but never really was, and swings it at you? Ever been guilty of that yourself? I sure sometimes have. And it ends the same way-lots of old and new hatchets swishing through the air... everyone ends up with more wounds and stories of endings, stories of resentment and indifference.

In today's passage from Matthew, Peter has this conversation with Jesus: "Master, you've been talking a lot about how we are to relate to others who hurt us deeply, and how we make things right with them. How often should we forgive? Don't you think seven times is about right?" Jesus

looked at Peter and said, "Not seven times, Peter, but seventy—seven times!" Jesus was actually saying: "If you have to count how many times you forgive, you aren't really forgiving. Throw away your calculator. Your forgiveness must be unlimited, generous, unconditional. Forgiveness is to be practiced habitually. Forgive others until it works!"

If Jesus defines forgiveness as unlimited and unconditional. How come Matthew uses the parable of the unforgiving servant to illustrate forgiveness? At first glance, the parable is problematic for me because I thought Jesus was all about grace and generosity and mercy. But this parable is a typical Matthew style of reward and punishment that ends up with the unforgiving servant being tortured in a dungeon. It's important to understand what's happening in the first century world. Matthew must have thought that his congregation needed some waking up to do - a warning of the consequences of merely being hearers but not doers of God's word. If the king represents God in this parable, it is dangerous for us to accept that God only forgives us when we forgive others. It doesn't make sense. But what if the parable is offering us a lesson about God's way of doing justice? That this parable is about practicing forgiveness does not deny the possibility or the necessity of justice. Rather, it redefines justice, and ensures that it is God's peculiar brand of justice we are practicing and not the retribution and retaliation that often masquerade as justice. In calling us to forgive, Jesus offers us a different kind of justice that holds open the possibility of a new future, a way through the hurt and pain that can lead to transformation and new life. Forgiveness is about having our lives defined by the justice of God rather than the justice of the kingdoms of this world.

In 1990, South African President Frederik Willem de Klerk began negotiations to end apartheid, culminating in multi-racial democratic elections in 1994, won by the late Nelson Mandela. One person who embodies the apartheid movement is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He lived Apartheid. He and his family experienced it firsthand. Several of his friends were imprisoned and even killed in the violence that defined South Africa under this system. When that system of oppression was abolished, the South African people faced a crossroads: would they simply live to be oppressed people throughout history, or could they find a different path that would lead to healing for both oppressed and oppressors alike?

The leaders of the new South Africa formed a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to try to seek that different path. Instead of handing out punishment, the whole purpose of the commission was to give victims the chance to tell their stories, and to give the oppressors a chance to tell the truth about their crimes and seek forgiveness and clemency. One of the foundational principles of this experience is what Desmond Tutu calls “Ubuntu.” It is a word that stands for the idea that we all share a common humanity. It says that the only way the human family can thrive is to regard, to consider another human being, even someone who has wounded us deeply, not as an enemy, but rather a fellow human being, a brother or a sister. It seems to me that, when we ask God to “forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”, it means we have to practice “Ubuntu.” We have to acknowledge that we share a common humanity even with those who wrong us. Then and only then can we begin to set others and ourselves free from the vicious circle of bitterness, hatred, and violence, and move into the freedom of forgiving as we have been forgiven.

I’m sure all of us here are in a similar situation where we need to forgive or be forgiven. Truth be known, forgiveness is a difficult word to practice. This particular teaching is very challenging for anyone who is in an abusive relationship or one who is constantly bullied or put down. Jesus does not want anyone ever to get beaten up. Jesus wants all abuse and violence in any form to stop. But here’s what I understand. Jesus wants us to forgive the sinner but not to forget the sin. "Yes, I forgive you, but not the violence. For the relationship to continue, the violence must stop. And even if the relationship does not continue, my heart will be in a state of forgiveness, not fear, not anger, not resentment. Jesus teaches us that forgiveness is about restoring a right relationship.

In an essay she titled “Unpacking Forgiveness”, Debie Thomas suggested that before we even begin to define forgiveness, we need to understand first what forgiveness is not.

1. Forgiveness is not a denial of injustice. It isn’t pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt, or that Christianity requires us to forget past harms and “let bygones be bygones.” Like human beings, God is grieved and angered by injustice.

2. Forgiveness is not a detour or a shortcut. It is not palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous tasks of repentance and transformation. It is a continuous process.
3. Forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. Forgiveness is not an end, but rather a beginning. A re-orientation. A leaning into the future.
4. And finally, forgiveness is not quick and easy. Forgiveness is a messy, non-linear process that can leave us feeling liberated one minute, and bleeding the next.

If forgiveness is not denial, or a shortcut, or a reconciliation, or an easy process, then what is it? What exactly is Jesus asking of us when he tells us to forgive each other again and again and again and again? The Rev. David Hockett offers these words. He says: "Forgiveness is a practice, a discipline made possible by the grace of God, not some heroic act of the will. It is something that we need to practise again and again, on a daily basis, until it becomes a part of who we are. Forgiveness is not forgetting. One cannot forgive that which is forgotten. Forgiveness involves telling each other the painful truth, not holding something over the other person, but finding a way forward that breaks the cycle of "eye-for-an-eye" violence in which we so often find ourselves trapped in. Forgiveness is not about becoming a doormat and relishing the role of victim. Forgiveness is about freedom - being freed from the horrible things others might have done to us. Likewise, forgiveness is not a strategy for turning our enemies into our friends; it is instead a grateful response to God's grace."

A church member refused to recite the Lord's Prayer, especially this line: "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us." When confronted by the minister, the member responded: "It will force me to forgive Joe who caused me so much hurt and pain." Having someone do something that hurts us is hard to take and hard to get over with. The pain is hard to describe. But the greatest suffering we inflict on ourselves when we refuse to forgive, is that we cut ourselves off from the right relationships. If our hearts are full of anger or resentment or hatred, there is no more room to accommodate God's grace and forgiving love. It's like a hand made into a fist. What can you put in this hand? Nothing. But when the hand is opened, reaching out to give, can you not see that it is also open to receive? It is the

same with our hearts. If our heart is open to giving forgiveness, it is also open to receiving it. Forgiveness is a gift, a blessing we can bestow on the person who hurt us. It is also one of the greatest gifts we can give to ourselves.

It's time to let God's love and forgiveness flow into our hearts and into our relationships. And when that happens, we'll find ourselves burying every hatchet, great or small, so deep in the soil of forgiveness that we never take them up or even think of them again-for that is what God has done and keeps doing for us. What do we get from hanging on to others' debts? Nothing. Only separation from others- especially from those we love. More than 3000 people died in the 9-11 tragedy or the holocaust that killed millions of Jews or those Canadian soldiers who were killed in wars. What about those who were victims of violence and greed on a daily basis? Of hatred and anger that did not have closure? What about those of us who were recipients of "unforgivable behaviour"? Still, what do we get out of hanging on to these debts? When we let the debt go, when we forgive seventy-seven times, with God's grace, we are transformed and re-oriented to a better, freed person. And for these, we give thanks. Amen.

Sources I used: BCUC Lectionary Group, David Ewart – www.holytextures.com, Nancy Rockwell – “Forgiving” (A Bite in the Apple), Alyce Mackenzie – patheos.org, Debie Thomas – Unpacking Forgiveness (journey with jesus.net)