

We might infer from Peter’s question to Jesus he was experiencing some friction with someone in the church. Someone in the church was either offending him or hurting his feelings. He asked Jesus, “If someone in the church wrongs me, how many times should I forgive them?”

Many years ago, I had an eye-opening experience. During an Ash Wednesday worship service, we invited everyone to write down on a little piece of paper something they struggled with. Ash Wednesday is a time of confession and repentance. We asked people to write on a piece of paper something they wanted to confess.

During the service, they were invited to come forward and place their little slip of paper in a basket. It was a way of symbolizing releasing or letting go of whatever weighed heavy on them. It was all done anonymously, but after the service, I read each of the little slips of paper.

To my surprise, the number one issue, the thing mentioned most frequently was the struggle to forgive someone. I had no idea the lives of so many people were affected so deeply by anger and resentment they could not shake. It only came out when they had a chance to make an anonymous confession.

Years ago, I read a study regarding youth and the church. A large sample of youth were asked how they felt about the church. Among those with negative feelings, the most prevalent response was that they believed the church was hypocritical.

They believed church folk, too often, fail to practice what they preach. They talk about loving everyone, but they judge others. They talk about forgiveness, but they can hold a grudge as long as anyone might. Hypocrisy was the biggest turn-off for youth.

Today, I want to propose to you that we can’t have meaningful relationship without forgiveness. Forgiveness might not be necessary among mere acquaintances. But if you’re going to live with someone, or spend a significant amount of time with another person, or have conversation that goes beyond the weather, or to work closely with others, feelings will eventually get hurt. It’s inevitable.

When that happens, we have choices. We can hold on to our anger and resentment. We can hold a grudge. We can try to get revenge or get back at the person in some way. In which case, the relationship continues to deteriorate. However, another option is the spiritual practice of forgiveness.

I'm a believer that forgiveness is the only way out of the hurt and the resentment. This summer, a good-sized group, here at the church, read a book on forgiveness by Bishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu. They lived through the devastating racism of apartheid in South Africa. Bishop Tutu chaired the groundbreaking Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So, they learned a thing or two about forgiveness.

They wrote this: "Because we are human, some of our interactions will go wrong, and then we will hurt or be hurt, or both. It is the nature of being human, and it is unavoidable. Forgiveness is the way we set those interactions right. It is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unraveling."

And that's why when Peter asked about how many times he should forgive a church member, Jesus responded, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." That was probably a way of saying, "I want you to forgive your fellow church member as many times as it takes. Don't even bother keeping count."

Jesus would often provide his hearers instruction and follow it up with a parable to illustrate it. So, I want to briefly share with you the Tutu's response to the question of HOW to forgive. Then, we'll look at the parable which I believe provides MOTIVATION to forgive.

In their book, the bishop and his daughter lay out a 4-part process of forgiveness. Step 1 is to tell the story. We can only heal the hurt that we can name. You verbalize what happened to you to your best friend, or to your pastor, or to the person who wronged you.

Sometimes when we're wronged, we obsess about the past. We go over it in our minds over and over. We can't stop wishing things would have been different, but we can't change the past. Comedian Lily Tomlin put it this way. She said, "Forgiving is giving up all hope for a better past."

Step 2 is to name the hurt. We have to acknowledge our feelings about the situation. Naming the hurt means answering the question “How did what happened affect me?” Anger and resentment that stay locked up inside can actually harm us.

When I first started living on my own, I was cooking bacon one day. When it came to drain off the grease, I grabbed an empty yogurt container. It only took a couple moments for the hot grease to melt the container from the inside and I had a counter full of grease. That’s what I imagine anger and resentment does to us.

This week someone shared another way to say it. “Not forgiving is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

After telling the story and naming the hurt, step 3 is to offer forgiveness. That simply means not harboring the anger and resentment. It doesn’t necessarily mean the relationship will be restored. Forgiveness is simply no longer allowing our feelings to hold us captive. Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. When we forgive, we become our own liberators. It’s a decision, a courageous decision, a healing decision.

Step 4 is to decide whether or not we’ll restore the relationship. This is where I think the parable Jesus told is helpful. An accountant of the king was audited and found very short. Let’s call it a million dollars. He finds himself in a desperate situation. There’s no way he can make up the deficit.

The king considers it carefully. There’s no way that, on an accountant’s salary, the servant would ever be able to pay the interest on a million-dollar debt. The king saw no benefit of punishment or imprisonment. Moved by compassion, the king decides that the most humane thing to do was to take the loss and forget about it.

Now, the accountant had a friend who owed him a tiny amount, let’s call it \$5. When the friend could not pay it, the accountant became enraged to the point of grabbing him by the throat and having him thrown into debtor’s prison. When the king heard about the cruelty of his former accountant, he rescinded his pardon.

With this story, Jesus contrasted the attitude of the king with the attitude of his accountant. The king showed great mercy and compassion, but the accountant showed anger. The accountant was forgiven his debt, but was not willing to forgive the debt of his friend. It’s a warning to the hearer to not be like the accountant. Because God forgives each of us for all our sin, it’s incumbent on us to offer forgiveness to those who sin against us.

In fact, Jesus was entirely committed to the discipline of forgiveness. Even after being nailed to a cross and deserted by his closest friends, he made some of his last utterances words of forgiveness: "Forgive them, Lord. For they know not what they do."

The church is a community of forgiveness. Because God first forgave us, it's incumbent on us to turn around and forgive others. Step 1 is to tell the story of what happened. Step 2 is to name the hurt and how it affected you. Step 3 is to offer forgiveness, which means to release any anger and resentment. Step 4 is to reconcile or release the relationship.

Bishop Tutu begins his book by describing the pain of living in a house in which his father physically abused his mother. He was too young to do anything about it. He carried that pain into adulthood. His father is long gone, so Tutu decided he had to forgive his father in his heart.

He wrote, "I decided I would walk the path of forgiveness with him, because I know it is the only way to heal the pain in my boyhood heart. Forgiving my father frees me. His violence and my inability to protect my mother no longer define me. I am not the small boy cowering in fear of his drunken rage. I have a new and different story. Forgiveness liberated both of us. We are free."

I believe that's the kind of freedom God desires for all of us, and for the church. God wants each of us to be able to say, "I'm free from hurt. I'm free from anger. I'm free from the harm someone once caused me. And it begins with each of us, right where we are, with our own families and with our own church family.

It's why Jesus instructed his followers to pray, "Forgive us our debts, **as we forgive** our debtors."