

PRACTICE FORGIVENESS
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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 14:19-31

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. Who, by the way, would all be dead—drowned in the sea by end of the day.

What a lucky break for the Israelites, we might say. The wind blew in just at the right time. But there's another way of seeing this. Not as history, or miracle, but as metaphor for our own quest for liberation.

All of us struggle to be free of forces within and without that keep us down, shackled, bound to ancient wounds, shame, guilt and regrets. And then one day a door opens, the sea parts, and we see a way forward. Now what?

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter said to Jesus, *"Lord, how often should I forgive another? As many as seven times?"* Jesus said, *"No, not seven times; seventy-seven times!"*

Seventy-seven?! Really?! Now that's an odd number in more ways than one. But for Peter and his people it was a number with a story as much as "911" is a number associated with a story. What if Jesus had said, not seven times but 911 times? An American audience would feel something others might not.

There's a back story on the number "77." Here's the story that would have come to mind for first century Jewish people when Jesus said, *77 times*.

Once upon a time, according to the mythic tale from the Great Ancestors, Cain killed Abel and then announced that anyone who killed him or his kin would be avenged sevenfold. That's called revenge. Not an eye for an eye. But seven for one. Sevenfold.

In the very next tale, Lamech, a younger version of Cain, kills a man and then announces that anyone who kills him or his kin will be avenged seventy seven times. Not seven times; but seventy seven times. That's unlimited revenge. And it's still practiced. *If you behead two of our citizens, we'll kill you seventy seven times over and then some.* That's the way of the world.

How will this practice of unlimited revenge ever end? Not easily. But the place to begin, said Jesus, is with unlimited forgiveness. Not seven times; but seventy seven times. Practice forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the way to go but it's not an easy way. And that's because forgiveness is the hardest blessing and it shouldn't be given on the cheap.

Certain men who repeatedly abuse their wives or girlfriends are often quick to ask forgiveness, time after time after bloody time. They want forgiveness not because they are remorseful, but because they are needy and want to keep their prey close at hand. They want forgiveness without remorse. They want forgiveness with no effort to mend their ways. It's just another way to control and manipulate. It's another form of abuse.

Certain women and certain men are tempted to forgive quickly hoping that will make everything better, or hoping the problem will just go away, or maybe hoping to be a good Christian. But cheap forgiveness leaves the poison dart in the heart. It doesn't cleanse the wound. It makes things worse.

Forgiveness is a precious gift. It shouldn't be given or taken on the cheap. The offender must understand what and how much is being forgiven.

You've heard it said: for everything there is a season. And so it is. A time to forgive and time not to.

Some offenses can be forgiven quickly. "I'm sorry." "That's OK. Forget it." Over and done. That's forgiveness as a form of etiquette or simple politeness.

Some offenses can be forgiven as easily as that. But not all. Some are beyond etiquette. They are existential.

Some wounds are too deep to be easily mended. So it takes time. It takes respect for yourself as well as for the other. It takes thoughtfulness and discernment and sometimes the guidance of a trusted friend or counselor. It's a hard blessing.

Perhaps you heard or read the story several years ago in the *Washington Post* of a certain father facing death. He sought forgiveness from his four daughters all of whom he had badly abused. The sisters conferred with each other and decided not to forgive, for the father had simply taken too much from them, had hurt them too deeply for too long for him to die in peace. It was a blessing they could not give.

How do you love those
who never will love you
Who are happy to shove you out
in front of the train
How do you love those
who never will love you
I think only God knows
and God's not taking sides
I hope one day God shows us
how we can love those
Who never will love us
but who still we must love
How do you love those?
[Forgiveness by Susan Werner]

How do you forgive such people? It's a question that isn't easy to answer.

Years ago a woman in this town discovered what nearly everyone else already knew. Her husband was a serial cheat, betraying her and her child repeatedly.

She was devastated. She confronted him. He begged forgiveness. He wanted to save his marriage and his family, or so he said. And she was torn because she was a practicing Christian and knew what Jesus had said. She knew about the seventy seven times.

Am I obligated to forgive, she asked me?

(What would you have told her?)

I think so, I said. But that doesn't mean forgetting what he's done. And it surely doesn't mean letting him back into your life any more than you'd stay in business with a partner who kept stealing you blind. That would be foolish. You might forgive but you'd also terminate that partnership.

And that's what she did. It took a while. But the seas parted and she walked on through. She was free. And last I heard, she's still practicing forgiveness for that old betrayal.

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending all is well. It's not about condoning bad behavior or letting someone walk over you. It's about finding a way to love another despite all the hurt and injustice.

It's to see the other as you want to be seen yourself. It's to give the same benefit of the doubt you want for yourself. It's about letting go of rage, bitterness and resentment in order to live free in the moment.

It's about not drinking rat poison anymore hoping the other will drop dead. It's about accepting life as it is; full of hurts and mishaps, but also full of grace.

Which is to say, now and then we catch a break. And the only question is: will we take the break and turn it into a blessing.

I've been reading Leonard Mlodinow's book, *The Drunkard's Walk*. Mlodinow is a renowned physicist. He is fascinated by randomness, how chance rules our lives in more ways than most of us can fathom or admit. For example, what if you had gone through that other door instead of that one? What if you hadn't been five minutes late on that particular day?

Luck, as it turns out, is a more ancient belief than providence, the notion that God guides the destiny of the universe including every person in it. Luck just may, just may explain more than Providence.

Life may have purpose but it may be the purpose we make from random events—good and bad—in our lives. Yes, all things *can* work together for good; but not automatically; and not because an invisible hand is pulling strings like a puppeteer.

Yes, we can transform the hurts of life into something beautiful. But it takes grace and grit. With grace and grit we can turn ugliness into a hard blessing.

Mlodinow's father was interned in a Nazi concentration camp. He was dying of hunger. And so he stole a loaf of bread from the kitchen. The baker noticed one loaf missing.

The SS guard ordered all the suspects to line up and demanded that the culprit step forward. No one did. *Well, then, said the guard, I will start at this end and kill one at a time until the culprit confesses or until all of you are dead.*

As he raised his gun to the head of the first man in line, Mlodinow's father stepped out and said it was he who had stolen the bread. He would forever after tell his son that it wasn't because he was heroic. He just knew he'd be dead whether he confessed or not.

And here's where randomness comes into play. The baker, for no apparent reason, took the culprit into the kitchen and appointed him assistant baker, and thus he survived the holocaust, came to America, married and fathered a brilliant physicist who spends his life in awe of this amazing universe full of random grace.

You can call it randomness. You can call it luck. You can call it catching a break. You can call it grace. Amazing grace if you'd like. But no matter what you call it, what matters is how you respond to it.

For when you think about it, our lives are graced from our first breath to our last breath with one break after another after another. Yes, we get hurt and we hurt others. But then something happens.

A door opens, the sea parts and we have a choice. To ask forgiveness or not; to accept forgiveness or not.

A door opens, the sea parts and we have a choice. We can remain where we are or step out onto the path that leads through the sea to freedom. We have a choice to stay where we are or to let grace lead us home. We have a choice.

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HYMN

"Amazing Grace"