

PROPER NINETEEN, PENTECOST 16, YEAR A, SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

Two men were playing golf one day and the subject turned to marriage. One man said, "My wife and I argue a lot, and every time we argue she gets historical . His friend interrupted him, "You meant to say that she gets hysterical , didn't you?" The first man responded, "No, when my wife and I argue, she doesn't get hysterical; she gets historical She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me."

How many of us have done that and do that? You are a rare person if you don't bring up all the wrongs you have felt especially when you're arguing. Some of us can recall with pinpoint accuracy every bad thing that has ever happened to us and the smallest details surrounding each event. Like re-runs on TV, some of us have hurtful memories playing repeatedly on the screens of our minds, and these mental re-runs continue to exacerbate the hurt. And the more wrongs we rack up against someone the harder it is to forgive.

Every Sunday we say "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Some of us say it every day in our personal prayers. We say it, but are we really ready and willing to forgive others in equal measure to how much we have been forgiven by God?

To forgive someone the hurt they have caused us, can be one of the toughest things that a Christian is called to do. There are people who have fallen out with family members, who are no longer talking to one-time-friends or who have dropped their connection with a congregation because they have found it impossible to forgive. The hurt is so enormous it would mean giving up too much to go to those who have hurt them and seek a way to be reconciled to that person. It is just too hard to forgive and put the hurt behind them and settle the differences between them.

Let's face it, forgiveness is counter-culture. What I mean by that is that forgiveness goes against what is practiced in our society. Revenge, an eye for an eye, racism and prejudice are the ways our culture deals with hurt and those who offend us.

Do you recall the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina in 2015, where nine people were murdered during Bible study? At the shooters arraignment several relatives of the shooting victims said that they forgave the shooter. Headlines quickly picked up on this with How do you forgive a murder? Or "we should not forgive a murderer. It was as if the world could not come to terms with the prospect that it is possible to forgive someone like this assassin.

As I said, forgiveness goes against the grain of our human nature. If someone offends us or causes us hurt in some way, it's natural for us to want to break off our relationship with that person. There is no question about who should take steps to restore the friendship – the person who has caused the offence. That's the natural human way we deal with disagreements. But just like last weeks lessons Jesus tells us to do the opposite.

If there was a passage of Scripture that we would like tear out of our Bibles, it is Jesus' words about forgiveness. They are just too hard and impossible to carry out. What Jesus had to say on this subject cuts us deeply because all of us at some time find ourselves in a situation where we are at loggerheads with another person. Jesus said, "If someone sins against you, go and point out what he/she has done to hurt you and be friends again."

Peter is concerned about how many times he should keep on forgiving someone. He is inferring that there must be a limit to the number of times he should have to forgive someone who repeatedly hurts and offends him. Jesus tells Peter that there is no end to the number of times we should seek a renewal of friendship and reconciliation.

Our response is but, but, but. We know to forgive is tough and we don't want to do it. But that's exactly what Jesus commands us to do. We are not told to do it if we feel like it. We are told to take the initiative and attempt to work out reconciliation with the person who has offended us.

I think it's important to say what forgiveness isn't. It is not forgetting. Memories of the past and even the pain that they cause have a great deal to teach us, so that we do not repeat the patterns that lead to abusive situations, relationships, and even societies.

Forgiving is not endorsing. By trying to understand those who have wronged us, or even forgiving them, we are not saying that their actions are acceptable.

Forgiving is not pardoning. When we forgive, we are not exonerating anyone from responsibility or justice.

Forgiving is not a form of martyrdom. When we forgive, we do not suppress our emotions and we are not doing it for the person who wronged us we are forgiving for ourselves.

What do I mean by that? Forgiveness means freedom. Forgiveness frees us. It opens us up. It allows us to stop playing games. We no longer have to pretend that it didn't hurt; we don't have to pretend that everything's fine.

When we forgive, we say to the person who has hurt us, 'I will not allow you to do that again!' But more importantly, when we forgive, we say to ourselves, 'I am moving on with my life; I refuse to be held back by her mistakes... or his problems!'

That's forgiveness. It's not saying that everything is alright (that would be a lie) it is saying, 'I am moving on now... there is no grudge, no revenge - it's over; I am through; the past is past and I am free!'

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber, writes that the power of forgiveness is to free us for the work of justice and transformation. This is what she says:

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for."

At the heart of forgiveness is a profound act of letting go. The word for forgiveness in Greek and the Aramaic means, "to release," "to let go," "to surrender." We decide to release our grip on the hatred, rage, and hurt, and claim our place in God's ceaseless love and forgiveness.

I am reminded of that old saying about anger and hatred. To nurture our anger and hatred is like drinking poison hoping that it is going to kill the other person. And yet all it does is kill us and separate us from God's love. To forgive means to refuse to let what happened destroy us and alienate us from God and from one another. Seventy times seven! We forgive and forgive. It demands hard work and vigilance, but it is the way to life and discipleship and to God.

Jesus invites us to "forgive from our hearts." May we go that way as faithful disciples. Amen.