

Sermon 091717 Forgiveness
Scripture Matthew 18: 21-35
Sermon Title Why Forgive?

You've heard me preach many times on forgiveness. I consider it my job to go back to that topic over and over again just because forgiving is one of the hardest things for people to do. I try to preach on it at least twice a year. It's kind of like when I was in business management. Every six months I'd go back to tardiness and dress code. Forgiveness sermons are maintenance sermons.

I say that we need to forgive, not because the person deserves to be forgiven, but for self-care. We don't need that person to be taking up all that real estate in our hearts and minds. By letting go of the resentment, we are making ourselves healthier.

Today, I'd like to come at forgiveness from a completely different direction. Today, we are going to look at the experience of asking for forgiveness. One of the things that I find in people in general, and I'm not talking about anyone here specifically, is that people tend not to be self-critical.

We are much quicker to find faults in others than ourselves. Let's get real, folks. We all screw up. We all sin. We all trespass against others. The hard part is recognizing that in ourselves and taking measures to correct it.

It is true that we sometimes say and do things that are hurtful to others and we have no idea that we have hurt them. Our Jewish brethren have an interesting tradition to handle when they might have unknowingly trespass someone.

Let me start by saying that Jews are called to forgive and ask for forgiveness all year. But in the ten-day period between Roshashonna and Yom Kippur, Jews go to the people in their life and ask for forgiveness for any trespass they might have done. Metaphorically, God 'opens the book' in the period between the High Holidays. If they are not forgiven on the first try, they are called to ask again, if they are refused the second time, they are called to ask a third time. If still turned down the third time they are released from any further obligation to ask.

This process doesn't involve a simple apology. Apologizing and asking for forgiveness are very different things. Asking for forgiveness in its very act involves a heartfelt resolution to correct the behavior going forward. Sometimes emissaries are sent to lobby for forgiveness. This is based on the idea that when there is a conflict between two people, it has a damaging effect on everyone.

Once the ten-day period is over and they have atoned with the people in their lives, they have Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This

is when they fast, stay in temple all day asking for atonement from God. At sundown, metaphorically God 'closes the book' and they breakfast.

This brings us to our gospel lesson this morning. It appears that Peter is trying to impress Jesus by going beyond the three-time obligation. He says to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Jesus is saying that there is no end to the forgiveness thing, and so it is.

Meg's son, Charlie, is a super impressive young man. He is a scientist working for a lab that is the dominant player in the field. He is also very funny, which goes a long way with me. He now has a girlfriend who is wonderful. They have all the makings of wedding bells in the future.

One day, early on, Charlie called his mentor and mother, really upset. He had angered Brittney and he didn't know why. He asked his mother what to do. She said, "First, apologize, then ask her what you did or didn't do to make her so upset. You need to know so you can correct it going forward." That advice was spot on. As we mentioned before, we sometimes have no idea that we are being hurtful, and the best open is an apology.

Now, I'm going to share with you a story of which I am not proud. It happened a few years ago. I had made dinner that we ate in the

dining room. At the time, we didn't have seat cushions on the wooden chairs. I got up after dinner to go sit in a comfortable chair. Meg got furious. She didn't say anything but was slamming pots and pans around. It was scary. She said, "I'm going for a walk!" She left without even taking the dog. I didn't know what to do. In an act of pure cowardice, I went to bed. I was asleep by the time she got upstairs. When we woke up the next day I did apologize and ask her what happened.

She said that I just stood up and left in the middle of a conversation. She felt deserted. I explained that my backside hurts when I sit too long in the dining room chairs. We bought seat cushions the next weekend and the problem went away.

I have at times received apologies that I knew were insincere. I think that it is important in this forgiveness thing to be authentically sorry and to be determined not to hurt the person again.

Forgiving and asking for forgiveness, in my view, is part of the process of self-improvement. We become healthier and better people when we commit to forgiveness.

I have said many times that we have much to learn from our Jewish brethren. There is a notion that I mentioned in the earlier part of this message that is worth holding up.

It is the part during the 'open book' time when emissaries are sent to ask for forgiveness. This is on the notion that when there is a conflict between two people, it negatively effects the whole group. I don't know of this idea being in any Christian teachings. It is certainly the case in small groups. A business office needs to find professional ways to get through conflicts within the group. Teams need to do the same thing. The military has well developed strategies to keep everyone on the same page.

It may be that Jews have this idea because, by comparison, they are a relatively small group compared to the vast number of people who identify as Christian. But the idea that a conflict between two people effects the whole group is absolutely true, no matter the size of the group. To forgive and ask for forgiveness makes the whole group better. So, it's not just for the benefit of one person, or two people, it has a ripple effect.

So, let each one of us take a good hard look at ourselves. Let us ramp up our self-awareness and be more critical of ourselves and maybe less critical of others. Let us be more willing to ask for forgiveness. Let us be more willing to forgive others, for our good, for the good of the other person, and for the good of the whole group. When we forgive and ask for forgiveness, we not only help ourselves,

the other person, and the whole group, it brings us closer to God. Let go of resentment and let God guide you in forgiveness. AMEN