

“Mercy Given, Mercy Shared”  
Psalm 14; Romans 14:1-12;  
Matthew 18:21-35

September 13, 2020  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Forgive. It has always seemed like a fairly straightforward word, and yet each time I come to a passage like this that talks about forgiveness, I seem to struggle with it. I wonder if I were to give you a little quiz asking you to define “forgive” and “forgiveness,” what definition you would come up with. This is one of those places where we think about what it means to forgive. We have to reflect on something that seems much more complicated in the end than I had thought it to be.

Sometimes I think it’s pretty simple. And yet, as I look at the context in which this passage comes, it comes just after what we talked about last week, where Jesus gives them a process for trying to restore, regain, reconcile with someone else in their family of faith. Now, Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Jesus, how many times do I have to forgive?” It seems what he’s saying is, “How many times do I have to go through this process? How willing do I have to be to work at this process—to go to them individually, or get some other help, or bring it to the community?”

If that process of restoration, of reconciliation, of regaining that other is what forgiveness means, it feels like it is a little different than what I usually think about. Usually I think about forgiving as just letting go of something. I think what’s interesting is, particularly if we think back to when Jesus said if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven., as it is translated in the NRSV, the word behind “will be done” is really about beginning. It will be begun.

So often I think about forgiveness as an end. It’s over. Once I’m forgiven or I forgive, it’s over. Yet, this process seems to be a beginning. When I’m forgiven, I’m at a beginning. I’m ready to move forward. We acknowledge that there is a problem. Sometimes I feel like forgiveness is to say, “It’s fine. There’s no problem.” But the whole process says there *is* a problem. There *is* a brokenness and we need to fix it. Forgiveness is that beginning. It’s saying, “Let’s do this. Let’s work on it.”

I always have this problem between forgiveness and consequences or accountability. It feels like I’m asked to forgive, and it means there is no accountability, there are no problems. That’s just not the truth. There *is* a problem and there *are* consequences to our actions. What it feels to me like is God is inviting us to recognize, and Peter seems to recognize, that forgiveness is a process. It is a beginning. Peter is asking Jesus, “How often do I have to do this?” Jesus basically tells him to do it as many times as it takes. But he is not saying there is no problem.

I was thinking about this in a couple of ways, trying to understand. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, there was a consequence. God didn’t quit loving them, but there was a consequence. There was a new beginning that had to occur. The whole history of scripture seems to be about trying to regain that relationship with God, God inviting that, and how hard it is for us humans to accept and live into that relationship.

I was thinking about how there are consequences to our actions. It is probable that all this smoke we are experiencing, the fires up and down the West Coast of the United States, the people displaced, the property damaged or lost, the lives lost, is a result of the way we have been living. It's a result of climate change. If that's the truth, and it seems that is what is going on, then we are experiencing the consequences of the way we have been living. We can't just go to God and say, "We're sorry. We didn't mean to do that." and expect those consequences to just go away. I don't think that's the way it works. I think what would happen is we can say, "God, we're sorry," and God would say, "Great! We have a place to begin."

I even think about it as Jesus going to the cross for our sin, and what happens there is that God says, "Yes, I'm ready to forgive. You can enter into new life." It's a beginning. It's not an ending. It's not a free pass. It's an invitation to somewhere new, and a beginning.

Jesus is saying that is, in some ways, the ministry he is inviting us to. He is inviting us to continue the process of trying to get those beginnings going, and then inviting us to follow him and live out that new life, to live into the changes he would bring to us and to guide us.

So perhaps that's enough to convince us that there is a sense that we are invited into a new beginning. We are told and we recognize that it is something that we do over and over again. But then he goes on to tell this parable. Sometimes I wish this parable weren't there because it would be a lot easier with out it. I would still be living with that sense that I could just say, "Thank you for the forgiveness." But Jesus goes on to say that the kingdom of God can be compared to this earthly king who forgives, and we see this discussion about mercy. He's not saying that the kingdom of God is exactly like this kingdom, but he is saying you can look to an earthly kingdom and see something about mercy that we can recognize. Even in an earthly kingdom when mercy is given, people expect that mercy is going to be shared. If somebody just takes and takes and doesn't give, there is something wrong.

As I was driving in this morning, maybe it was something about all the smoke in the air, but for some reason I began to think back over my life. Particularly I was thinking about those times when I felt like I had sinned. I realized how many times it felt like I had received something and then refused to give anything. I had taken but not given back. When this earthly king gives, there is an expectation that that mercy will be given back. Somehow we can't receive the fullness of grace unless what is given us is shared.

So, there are two things that I want to make sure to note. One is that in this mercy that is given, in the process that is shown, there has to be a response. Sometimes I have been so taken with forgiveness as something that is simply given, and yet the process that Jesus gives us, this parable that Jesus gives us, shows us that there is more to it. In Luke 17:3, Jesus is talking about forgiveness, but he says it must come with repentance. There has to be an action in response. You see, Jesus came to forgive our sins, and in doing so invites us into a relationship with God and into new life.

But we don't do that simply by receiving. It's not only receiving, but allowing that receiving to change us and to live into that new life that God gives us, to be the people of God. It is why Jesus' people were called the people of The Way, because their way had changed. They had become a new people.

The second thing is that the invitation of forgiveness is to new life. What I recognized on my ride in this morning is how easy it is to think about the mercy, the things that have given me a leg up, and begin to think about it as something I deserved. Then I become stingy about wanting to give it to anybody else. What I recognized is that Jesus is talking about the compassion of God showing mercy to us, enabling us to know forgiveness and grace. When we are invited to know that, to recognize it, to give thanks for it, we are invited to live into it and to take what we are given and share it. It is, in fact, in the sharing that we find out that we have entered into that new life. We begin to recognize something that Jesus gives us that we wouldn't gain on our own.

We live in a time that is full of turmoil and I don't know how to find peace within it, but I do find that when I follow Jesus, when I recognize the mercy given and try to return that to the world, I also find that there is a peace that goes beyond all understanding. Jesus seems to be at work. God seems to be at work in our lives.

Forgiveness feels a little more complicated to me than I had thought. It is about a mercy given and a mercy shared. It is about not only having open hands to receive, but open hands to give. It is finding that through the forgiveness we are given we are invited into new life. So we are invited, I think, in practical ways in our lives each day, each week, through the years of our lives, to figure out how are we receiving the gift and sharing it. How are we allowing the gift God has given us to open us up to the world around us? Because I don't think receiving the forgiveness and then showing disdain for the world or for others is something that opens us to that new life. New life seems to be opened through trusting in God's guidance, not fearing what I will or won't have.

We are invited to remember and to wonder and to exalt at the grace God gives us. It is not only as we receive, but as we share that gift that we find the fullness of the new life that God invites us to, and in sharing the gift that we truly follow Jesus. How do we share what we have been given? How do I let go of the desire I have to hold onto what I have and the fear I feel, so that I might indeed give of myself, give of the grace I've been given?

As we go into this week, as we face the struggles of our world, we are invited to see what we can give in a way of forgiveness. That is, to work through the problems we have together. Not to say everything is fine, but to figure out how to work through it. And we have a God who invites us to that work, will go with us into the process, and will guide us through it. For that, I am incredibly thankful, for I know I need the mercy of God. I know I need the guidance of God, the grace of God. I know it is mine to share, and in that sharing to find the peace of Christ that goes beyond all understanding. Amen.