

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

.

“Forgiveness When It’s Impossible” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman
(9/17/2023, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

.

Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Romans chapter 14, verse two

Some believe in eating anything, while the week eat only vegetables.

Just kidding on a preach on that.

I don't know if y'all heard that. But that was sort of like what the Bible hates vegans. What what's going on the week eat only vegetables? Well, we could talk about that it's a long story. Isn't it amazing the things that Christians have been able to fight over through the millennia, who eats vegetables, and who eats more than vegetables? Anyways, I want to talk about the Gospel of Matthew 18. But before I do, I want to ask a question, which is this? How do you get someone to do something they don't want to do?

How do you get a child to clean their room? How do you get a husband to actually see the doctor? Instead of just complaining all the time? About feeling bad? How do you get they laughed at the nine o'clock? Apparently, it's not an issue in this congregation.

If you have a friend who's in a toxic relationship, how do you get them to make a change?

How do you get someone to really need some help to go to therapy? How do you get someone to let something go?

That is a resentment they're holding on to forever.

There's lots of different ways. Mary Poppins said, A Spoonful of Sugar makes the medicine go down. Right? You can bribe people with rewards you can that's sugar is both the reward and a distraction.

You can try the reverse psychology that works when raising children

for about three months. And then their brains develop and it's done.

There onto you. There's the yelling, you know, the vein popping out on the neck, the drill sergeant approach to change people, then there's a popular thing in some families not in mind. So I can't relate to this. But in some families, there is the forming of alliances.

Would you your sister really listens to you? Would you call her and she you know, she'll just appreciate it. She won't hear from me, but you'll hear from you. And just ask her to come for Thanksgiving. She doesn't have to stay just at this is an alliance sort of a NATO family situation.

In Matthew 18, we see the situation of somebody who doesn't want to do something. And Jesus is trying to do some soul work with that person, how do you get somebody to do something they don't want to do. And that thing is not cleaning a room or talking to a family member. That thing is forgiveness. Because Jesus has just given a very difficult teaching.

He was talking about church conflict. This was Matthew 18. Last week, you might have heard it. And where Jesus says that when somebody has hurt your feelings or injured you in some way, you have to go to them and try to reconcile.

You have to forgive them. He doesn't say that. But that's the implication because obviously even to go to the person begins to feel like forgiveness from the very beginning. Because you'd much rather stay on your high moral ground and let them come groveling to you. What do you mean, I have to go talk to them. I have to be the one to make the initiative. I have to go to them and try to restore and reconcile with them. But they're the bad guy. But this is Jesus's instructions. And so the disciples dutifully listen to this lesson. Okay, we have to try to reconcile. And Peter understands exactly what he's saying, because this is the very next passage and Peter says to Jesus, how often do we have to do this? What is the quota of forgiveness? How much do I have to do it until it runs out? And I no longer have to forgive? This cotton headed ninny mothers.

Thank you, the one person who see now.

So

Peter is saying this in front of the disciples, and you can sort of see him he's sort of feeling very proud of himself. How often Lord, must I forgive? maybe as many as

seven times.

And Jesus says,

No.

I tell you the truth 77

or seven times seven, depending on your translation.

And don't get all literalistic with me. Don't start counting with your spouse 76 getting pretty close. You got one more.

The whole point is Jesus saying that there's no limit. It doesn't run out.

Just keep forgiving. And this is the thing that Peter clearly doesn't want to do. And in case you worried about, well, maybe I can just fake it. Maybe I can pretend to forgive. You know, like when two siblings are fighting and appearances, say you're sorry, say you're sorry. I'm sorry. But you know they're not. Jesus says no, in verse 35, forgive from the heart.

Let it go for real, you're not gonna bring it back up again in your own head or with them.

But we have this problem.

Bon Jovi that St. A New Jersey said in you give love a bad name. You know it, don't pretend to church people. He said your he said shot through the heart.

Shot through the heart and you're to blame.

These guys are great. You guys, I don't know what's happening over here.

They don't listen to rock and roll, pray for him.

Shot to the heart and you're to blame. There's something when you have to forgive from the heart, it sort of feels like something is broken. Now maybe you're given to do it. But many times in human relationships, that gets stuck.

To forgive someone from the heart.

I know people whose whole lives are based around a grudge. They're angry about something. And often, I mean, I would say the vast majority of the time it is legitimate, they are rightly angry, someone did something actually terrible and wrong, and they are angry. But through no fault of their own it that that wrong lands on your heart and on your mind, and on your soul at a time in your life where it leaves a deep impression.

Sort of like a meteoric impact that crater is there forever because of when it happened to you. And it sort of defines your whole life, your way of moving through the world.

This this anger, this resentment, this, this difficult thing. And it can be about a person, it can be about an institution. There's lots of kids often about the church, you know, I was dealt a really raw deal at some point. And now this kind of colors the way I see everything.

And forgiving is a complete non starter.

Even though if the person is able to see maybe realize that this is eating them like a cancer from the inside. There's that old saying in AAA that, you know, holding on to a resentment is you drinking the poison hoping the other person will die.

And yet many people keep just drinking the poison. They can't put it down.

And so we're stuck. So how do we do what Jesus says to do? Just keep keep forgiving.

And Jesus has this great insight into people. And so he doesn't lecture Peter about forgiveness. He doesn't give him talk, three steps to forgiveness.

He tells a story about a king that had a lot of servants, many of whom owed him money. And he goes to this one servant and says you owe me 10,000 talents, a currency we don't really use anymore, but it's essentially an unpayable debt, you owe me \$5 billion.

And the servant begs and pleads please don't throw me in debtors prison. Don't throw me in jail, I promise you, I'll get you the money.

And the king has mercy and forgives him, actually wipes out the debt. And then the servant with his new lease on life goes out and finds find somebody that owes him five bucks

and says Pay up.

And the guy says, I can't pay you right now I promise I'll get it to you just just give me some time. And the guy says, No, I'm throwing you and your whole family into jail until you can pay back.

What Jesus is trying to show Peter is a little bit about who he is. Because when we think that forgiveness is something we have to do sort of muster up the the moral integrity and the righteousness of heart. And then when we get it all figured out, then we can forgive somebody that's really hard to forgive. If we go about it that way.

We're sort of missing the point. We're not seeing ourselves

the way I think about when you

Have a resentment. It's like you've got your fist clenched around something.

And if you just look at your fist and say, okay, Jesus has to forgive, I'm gonna let it I'm gonna let it go, oh.

Jesus said, Forgive Ah,

okay, got three fingers. Maybe I can stop now.

And what Jesus does is say no, no, don't look, don't look at your hand, where you're holding on to this grudge. Instead, look at God's hand to you.

Look at how God has treated you.

And his hand has been open to forgive. And if you focus on this hand of God to you,

you might find that your fingers begin to loosen up in the way you treat other people. Because we are walking through the world, as people who have owed a great debt

that we cannot pay.

We most of the time, think of ourselves as good people, I'm a good person.

Well, I would suggest you do an anonymous survey of the people in your life. And they might name some of the wonderful things about you. But there's probably also some things that aren't.

And I just think about the ways the petty cruelties, the sharp words, the ignoring of people that are in pain, the ways we participate in systems that perpetuate really difficult environments for lots of people, the blindness to injustice, the self absorption, I mean, we just think that we're never part of the problem.

I always tell people this, I'm always amazed, you know, when I'm driving with an Uber driver or somebody else's, that we all need, like say, oh, all this traffic,

totally oblivious to the fact that, like, you're also driving. People think traffic's other people. Only, it's all these other people. My journey is legitimate. And I just, there's this, this blindness, I

think, to what's going on other selves.

I have a priest friend, who recently had an experience where someone asked him, his neighbor asked him, you know, because he's a priest, so he knows these people love to like stump the priest.

And so he says, If God is so good and loving, why is there so much evil in the world. And then my priest friend, who has a lot of courage, and apparently no desire to make friends said,

You are the evil in the world.

Oh.

We are all part of the evil in the world. We have all done these things, through intent, or maybe just neglect or whatever I've been given to. I was asked to be one of the main speakers for Baylor's football team this season. They have a weekly chapel service on Monday afternoons, and they called every Baptist in the city. And they all said no. And so then they called me.

And so I've had a chance to talk to them. One of the things that's been really interesting to me is seeing that there's something the coaching staff has, which is tell the truth Monday, where they tell the truth on Monday about everything that happened on Saturday, good, bad, or otherwise.

And I think what Jesus's story is trying to do is two things, one to tell the truth. And that's what I'm trying to do here to tell the truth on Sunday.

Tell the truth Sunday.

That the bad of the world. Yes, it's out there, but it's also in here.

Jesus is trying to help Peter, see, you think that you are so good that you're you just get to forgive people up to seven times. I'd rather you Peter, see the fact that you have been forgiven

a bajillion times, and will continue to be to the rest of your life because this is the heart of God. And so instead of looking at your hand and trying to open it up, look at God's hand to you.

What does this look like?

It looks like Robert Leon Davis.

So Robert Leon Davis was born in Louisiana and grew up in New Orleans in a family where there was abject poverty and trauma. He found a way out by joining the police force, and he became a New Orleans police

officer. He had good intentions at first but then the system was very corrupt. And he learned along with the rest of his colleagues, how to use their power to exploit others to extort to really cause injustice rather than punish injustice.

And he enriched himself in that process until he got caught in 1979 and he was sentenced to two

to prison, but he was able to escape before he actually went to jail. And he ran to Canada,

about as far away from New Orleans as he could get, and lived in the woods for 30 years.

living off the land in hiding, and the entire time he hated God.

He was an atheist.

But then something began to change. Then he said, God, if You're real, I'm going to put my shoes by the tree when I go to bed, and when I wake up in the morning, there better be a leaf in one of them and not the other. And it happened.

Instead, okay, that's a coincidence. So the next day he went to bed and he put a can out an upturned tin can and he put it down, he put a rock next to the can. And he said, Okay, God, if You're real in the morning, the rock better be under the can.

And he woke up the next morning.

He looked at it,

the rock was gone.

And he was so terrified. He didn't even look under the can. He just hopped a freight train to New Orleans and turn himself in.

And when it was time for his hearing, he went before the judge.

And the judge said I sentence you to 30 years in prison,

which is for him a life sentence. You would never get out of jail.

But then the judge said,

but the sentence is suspended. Because you've already served your time. You're in prison to yourself.

The next day, still reeling from this decision, Robert Leon Davis found out that the judge who was supposed to sentence him, was out

sick.

That had been the judge that had originally convicted him at the beginning, and remembered exactly who he was and all the bad things he did. And when that judge found out that he'd gotten off the hook, he went apoplectic what he got off scot free.

And Robert Leon Davis, this forgiven man was changed.

He wrote a book about his experience. I found out about it in my monthly Mockingbird magazine. And they made a note they, in this interview with him that they did in here, there's a little footnote. And it says Robert wants us to tell you that you make sure you tell your readers that he receives no royalties or profit from the sale of his book. He gives all the proceeds to an organization that helps victims of domestic violence, because being forgiven is enough for him.

When you're able to see yourself

as a forgiven person who had a debt that was unpayable, but now is forgiven, that changes how you walk through the world.

And that's what Jesus is trying to do for Peter and for all of us. And that's actually what we're trying to do in church here every Sunday is to tell the truth about who you are, but also to tell the truth about God, the One whose property is always to have mercy.

Amen.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>