



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## “Forgiveness”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely  
February 8, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew chapter 18 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*(Jesus is speaking) “If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you. If she or he listens to you, you have won a loved one back; if not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses. If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.”*

*Peter came up and asked Jesus, “When a sister or brother wrongs me, how many times must I forgive? Seven times?” “No,” Jesus replied, “not seven times; I tell you seventy times seven. And here’s why. The kindom\* of heaven is like a ruler who decided to settle accounts with the royal officials. When the audit was begun, one was brought in who owed tens of millions of dollars. As the debtor had no way of paying, the ruler ordered this official to be sold, along with family and property, in payment of the debt. At this, the official bowed down in homage and said, ‘I beg you, your highness, be patient with me and I will pay you back in full!’ Moved with pity, the ruler let the official go and wrote off the debt. Then that same official went out and met a colleague who owed the official twenty dollars. The official seized and throttled this debtor with the demand, ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ The debtor dropped to the ground and began to plead, ‘Just give me time and I will pay you back in full!’ But the official would hear none of it, and instead had the colleague put in debtor’s prison until the money was paid. When the other officials saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and went to the ruler, reporting the entire incident. The ruler sent for the official and said, ‘You worthless wretch! I cancelled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your colleague, as I dealt with you?’ Then in anger, the ruler handed the official over to the jailors until the debt had been paid in full. God in heaven will treat you exactly the same way unless you truly forgive your sisters and brothers from your hearts.”*

*\*The word ‘kindom’, often used by mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi–Diaz, replaces ‘kingdom’ because it represents an egalitarian realm and emphasizes our familial relationship with each other.*

## Sermon

Alright, who's ready to talk about forgiveness? (laughter) All right. Jim has been walking us through Genesis over the past several weeks and looking at those foundational myths and

symbols in our tradition. If you've been here, or watched online, you've heard him talk about the two trees in the garden, the tree of life, which represents our connection to the natural world and the interconnectedness of all life, and then the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which represents, really, this dualistic consciousness, this place of judgment.

I'm going to zoom down a little bit today and talk about a particular aspect of how we live together, which is forgiveness, and hopefully by the end, bring that back around to this idea of these two trees.

So, I want to start with what I believe forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It's not allowing further abuse. It's not wiping away wrongdoing that isn't accounted for. It's not condoning people's actions or turning a blind eye to violence or manipulation. It is not easy, immediate, linear, automatic. It's not something that can be rushed or demanded or required or even prescribed. It's not often asked for an equal measure of all people. Forgiveness is not women's work. It's not telling someone they're forgiven when they didn't ask for it. It's not something you can do on behalf of someone else. And I think it's not always possible. So this is what it's not, what is it?

In my estimation, forgiveness is a release, a letting go. It's an unknotting of pain. It's a restoration of self and a reclamation of power. It's seeing humanity in one another and in ourselves. It's a process, a labyrinth, a choice, an intention, a yearning, a prayer. It's an awareness of our bodies. It's a gift, a grace, a path, a way of life, an invitation. Forgiveness is possible.

Now, these aren't exhaustive lists. You're invited to add, to delete, to disagree, to edit. But often we hear about forgiveness as sort of this virtue. In our scripture today, Peter goes to Jesus, and you've probably heard this in some form or fashion in different ways, he asked Jesus, "Well, how often should I forgive? Like, seven times? Good." And Jesus is like, "No, seven times seventy." And seventy times seven is this infinite idea, this ongoingness of forgiveness, a fullness to our forgiveness, that it's not ever completed.

When these words are taken on their own, out of context, I think we get this idea, again, that forgiveness is sort of this virtue. It's a quality all unto itself, just to be a forgiving person. Really, forgiveness is lifted up as a supreme virtue, like the pinnacle of the spiritual life. But when it gets lifted up in this way, I think it gets abstracted and disconnected from real life and real living and real relationships.

In both of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, we heard Matthew today, these words of Jesus are spoken in the context of this longer discussion about community, how people are supposed to live together, how the church in particular is supposed to live together. It says, if someone offends you, if they wrong you, go and talk to them about it. If they don't listen in the way that they understand, take someone else with you. If they still don't listen, take the whole church with you. Even then, if they refuse to listen, let them be as a Gentile and a tax collector. Those seem like very harsh words. Gentile and tax collector is shorthand for the people who are outside the community. Also the ones that Jesus said he was sent to love. In Luke, it says, if a brother or sister wrongs you, you must rebuke them, you must name the hurt, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.

So how does this inform our understanding of forgiveness today? I think that it's important to remember that these words of forgiveness are talked about in the context of a community, of a community where people have promised to be in relationship with one another and to treat each other in a certain way. Always, there is an account for the wrong. The hurt, the harm is named. It's not shoved to the side. It's not just easily brushed over. It's named. It's also connected to, conditioned upon, the person who has caused the offense, really listening, hearing, understanding, or repenting, changing, transforming in some way.

I think it's also really important to hear that there are boundaries in the community to protect the ones who have been harmed. There are boundaries. There is a process. Even if that offender, one who won't change, won't listen, won't hear, is separated from the community, they are never outside the bounds of love. I think these are really important distinctions about forgiveness that sometimes get lost. Too often, the burden of forgiveness is placed on the one who has been hurt or harmed.

Throughout church history, throughout history in general, I believe that burden has often been placed on women and children, the people with less power. But here's this sense of accountability and naming of the truth rather than ignoring the harm. Hope for reconciliation, for restoration of relationship and community, a sense of forbearing with one another, if they keep working on it, you keep forgiving. But also a protective boundary. It's truth and justice and accountability and mutuality and protection and forgiveness all together. It's not forgiveness on its own as this isolated concept, this virtue to be achieved. It's a process and a principle to be lived out in a community. Of course, it's not easy, and it's messy, and some harms require different responses.

All of this is to say that I don't think forgiveness just matters for community, because I think we come here to St. Andrew's to be formed in a particular way for the whole of our lives. We see the cruelty and the bitterness and the violence in our greater world, and we want to live with love. We want to live with peace. We come here to cultivate a different way of being, and I think forgiveness is part of that larger project.

What does it mean outside of the promises of community, when we're not listened to, when repair doesn't happen, when reconciliation is not healthy or possible? We still have the work of the heart and the mind in those situations. It's still a personal journey that requires your wisdom, your timing, your discernment, not mine. I can share from my own experience of the process of forgiveness in hopes that it resonates with you in some way.

The times when I've been deeply hurt or harmed, I have experienced it as physical pain throughout my whole body. It's not just my heart, my mind, it's all of me that's hurt. To work through that, I've had to be honest with myself about the wound, the wound to my ego or to my sense of the goodness of the world, to my own self-worth, the humiliation. Sometimes it's been too much to see all of that at once, and I've needed time and space to work through all of that. I've had to let myself rage. Whether I've had to or not, I've often let myself entertain very creative revenge fantasies. (laughter) But finally, I've had to get tired of putting my energy into it, of putting my energy into the hurt. I've had to get in touch with the longing to let go, to be free

of it. Sometimes I've needed help to work through it, and it's often taken more time than I imagine to let go. It's kind of like when you have a splinter and pieces come out here and there and you didn't know it was still inside you, but there it is again. It's taken leaning into that yearning over and over and over again.

And I've been able to forgive, or at least, at the very least, stop wanting the other person to hurt. There are still things that I am working on forgiving. In my experience, forgiveness feels like a return of energy and power to myself, away from the pain and the hurt. I like what Archbishop Desmond Tutu says about this. He says,

*To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It's the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.*

Sometimes that forgiveness is a very, very long process, and that's okay. Recently, I've been captured by something Richard Rohr said in his most recent book, *The Tears of Things*. He said,

*The older I get, the more it feels like I must forgive almost everything for not being perfect, or as I first wanted it or needed it to be. This is true of Christianity, the United States, politics in general, and most of all myself. Forgiveness of reality, including tragic reality, is the heart of the matter.*

Forgiveness of reality. It says,

*All things cry for forgiveness in their imperfection, their incompleteness, their woundedness, their constant movement toward death.*

I think in the parable that was at the end of the scripture passage today, where the ruler forgives a man with enormous debt, only to turn around and deny forgiveness to someone who owes him far less, is a story about this cycle of forgiveness and how we're all bound up in this cycle of forgiveness. As Rohr says, *All things cry for forgiveness*. How will we choose to respond?

I think forgiveness has a lot to do with our ability to hold the imperfect and the good, the tragic and the beautiful, the love and the grief all together in our view of ourselves and each other and the world. It is to hold in heart and mind our common humanity and our interconnectedness, to resist the urge to see things dualistically, to look with mercy more than judgment. It isn't to ignore or to wipe away the hurt or the pain or to forgo seeking justice, but to hold all of it in view. It's to feel how we are interwoven together.

I'm sure you've heard of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the work of Archbishop Tutu and others to heal the hurts of Apartheid in South Africa. That work was grounded in the African idea of Ubuntu, I am because we are. We are all interconnected. I want to close today by sharing a story that comes out of that process. This is a story shared by a professor, named Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was a member of the commission, and she really worked to understand the nature of forgiveness that doesn't minimize irreparable harm. She talked with people who had forgiven others in that process. She talks about one woman in particular. This is a quote.

*A woman whose son was brutally murdered had attended the hearings daily and made a point of her best, wearing a hat she had knitted, and bead work of her own making. She wanted to be visible, to prove she had not been destroyed. She wanted her son's killers to*

*recognize her as a proud human being. When the black police informer responsible for her son's death asked to meet with her, she agreed. She described how in expressing his remorse, he laid his soul bare. His vulnerability evoked for her the nakedness of an infant in the womb. She felt empathy for the mother who gave birth to him, who had named him Tibelo, which means prayer, and who would have been pained to know of his deeds.*

In describing that connection to him, she used the word *inimba*, which translates as umbilical cord. It means much more,

*A deep personal connection felt as a movement in the body behind the navel. Rather than a connection with the person asking forgiveness, it is felt as an affinity, a shared common ground, womb to womb. Womb to womb with that person's mother, inimba recognizes another person in a way that encompasses their own relationships, that puts you in their shoes and engages you with their questions. It's a profound act of imagination that embodies the interwovenness of who we are."*

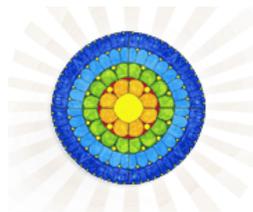
Forgiveness isn't about forgetting or condoning. Forgiveness needs safety, protection, dignity for those who are harmed. It always involves reckoning with the truth, whether that's in a community or in a relationship where we seek repair and reconciliation, or whether it's on our own, wrestling with the true cost of hurt, working through the pain. Forgiveness is ultimately grounded in our common humanity, our ability to see ourselves, each other and the world, in its imperfection and incompleteness, to hear how everything cries out for forgiveness. It's the work of holding it all at once, not in two separate halves. It's the love that heals, love that is connected, *inimba*, womb to womb. May we all be held with such grace.

## Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

As our journey begins again with a new week, I would remind you all that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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