



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Forgiveness is Letting Go of Pain”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
August 10, 2025

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:9-15 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
(Jesus is teaching) *“This is how you are to pray: ‘God in heaven, hallowed be your name! May your reign come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven: give us today the bread of Tomorrow. And forgive us our debts, as we hereby forgive those who are indebted to us. Don’t put us to the test, but free us from evil.’ If you forgive the faults of others, God will forgive you yours. If you don’t forgive others, neither will God forgive you.”*

Sermon

Dhammapada (of Buddhism) 1:1-5

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow “He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred. “He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred. Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.

Definition of “Forgive” ***Aphiemi (ἀφίημι)***

“This word carries the sense of letting go or releasing something, whether it's a debt, a burden, or a person.”

Well, thank you all for being here. And, this is good, we have people sitting in the middle. I was at home for five months. I just needed some space. I needed to get away. I'd watch online, and usually, there's nobody in this middle section. There'd be a lot of people over here, a lot of people

over there, but you couldn't see that online. So, this is good. We actually have people in the church!

Today, we're going to talk about forgiveness, which I don't think there's any topic that makes people feel guiltier than forgiveness. If you've just been abused, you've just had somebody take advantage of you or hurt you, and you come to church, and the minister is saying, *"If the eye causes you to sin, pluck it out."*

What we're talking about, this is spoiler alert, is a process that takes a whole lifetime. This is not a one-time deal. It doesn't usually happen quickly. It doesn't begin with feeling forgiveness or love for other people. So, we'll look at the steps and realize that sometimes we can do it, sometimes we can't. But every inch we move in that direction makes it a better world. At least that's what I'll be contending today, and you can decide whether, once again, I'm full of it.

I saw a picture, I guess, yesterday. James Talarico is a member here. He's also in the Texas legislature. There's now, thanks to the State of Texas, there's a wanted picture of him, which is funny, except for at some point that stuff becomes real. All of this fascistic stuff that people are playing around with, and we start laughing, because it sounds so stupid, is like Russian roulette to the Republic. At some point, those bullets start going off, and you can see that.

Donald Trump has cut funding for security in Washington and then used the increasing crime rate to justify him seizing the city - overcoming the democratically elected leaders. He's wanting to redistrict Texas, as you probably know, watering down the vote with the population that is brown or Black. I can't think of anything more un-American than gerrymandering. I realize that Democrats do it, too. But we've all got to stop.

How do we love people and yet resist the evil they would do to other people? How do we protect the oppressed from the oppressor without dehumanizing the oppressor? Because if we fall into hatred, that's their game, and we're not going to win it. Your human heart is what's going to guide you through these next years. Your compassion, your love, your sense of humor are all things you don't want to lose. Those are your beacon home.

The Church privatized the message of Jesus. To the extent that you don't get the political impact when you just read it, you don't realize that you're talking about a socialist here, an anarchist socialist. That doesn't mean that you have to be a socialist, but it means you put people ahead of property or you're not following Jesus. People shouldn't get arrested for treating other human beings equally.

A lot of times we see Jesus as naive, and he's aiming way too high for us. But they were in a much worse situation than we're in. I'm not saying we won't get to that place. But God didn't come up with the cross. The Church made that up, that God was angry, so Jesus had to die. Rome came up with the cross. Empire came up with the cross. What Jesus is resisting is oppression, all oppression of every person.

To join the movement of God. You don't even have to be a Christian. Case in point, we have a Buddhist here who believes in the same compassion. In this congregation, there are atheists who

believe in the same compassion. That's the point. This book is written by the disciple Matthew. To realize that Matthew was a tax collector is very important. He was a traitor to the people. He had sold out to the Roman Empire. But there has to be a place for people to come back to. If we cannot forgive people who've made a tragic mistake in the United States, if there's no fire escape from that mistake, then there's no hope for this country. There has to be forgiveness and healing. But there's a price tag. We can't cooperate with the oppression of any person.

So, we're starting on a sermon on forgiveness. I want to reiterate that it doesn't start as a feeling, and you can't do it perfectly. Jesus gives us an ideal. He's not naive, but he's giving us sort of like when we're building the building, it's like there's an architect who's got this pure design, and then the contractor comes along and says, "We can't build it there because it's limestone. We can't build it there because there's a tree." Jesus is talking about a pole star to guide your life. It's bad advice sometimes. Don't worry about your clothes. Don't worry about what you eat. Well, you better, a little bit. But the point is don't let that trouble your soul. Have a place, an inner sanctum inside of you, beyond the storm.

Let's look at the passage that's here. Just this last little place. Isn't it weird Jesus teaches the Disciple's Prayer, and then the punchline is to forgive. Isn't that strange?

Dhammapada (of Buddhism) 1:1-5

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred. "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred. Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.

You have the Disciple's Prayer. Oh, no, that's the Dhammapada!! Could you go back to the... Could you be Christian for just a little bit? [laughter] Thank you! Do you see why everybody gives me a hard time? [laughter] Thank you.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:9-15 (The Inclusive Bible)

(Jesus is teaching) "This is how you are to pray: 'God in heaven, hallowed be your name! May your reign come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven: give us today the bread of Tomorrow. And forgive us our debts, as we hereby forgive those who are indebted to us. Don't put us to the test, but free us from evil.' If you forgive the faults of others, God will forgive you yours. If you don't forgive others, neither will God forgive you."

Forgive our debts as those who are indebted to us. Don't put us to test, but free us. For if you forgive the faults of others, God will forgive yours. If you don't forgive others, neither will God

forgive you. Isn't that strange? That's at the end of the disciples' prayer. That's the new covenant. You may never hear that in a church.

But Jesus isn't a good bully chasing the bad bullies. He's saying, Christianity, the essence of it, is not believing in God, it's believing in love. The essence of Christianity is not believing in God, it's believing in love. To the extent that if you forgive other people, whatever this being or process is that creates the cosmos, it will drop the charges against you.

Now, obviously, this is poetic. But think about if Christianity believed that, how different our history would be. To not fight over something we don't really know. You can't know a mystery. God is a mystery. You cannot become an expert on mystery by definition.

I was the worst theological student of all time at Austin Presbyterian. I have an allergy, a psychic reaction, to talking about the mystery as though we know what we're talking about. As poetry, it's great. I don't have any problem. If you treat the creeds like hymns, like songs, like poetry, I'm there. But when you make definitions of the infinite, you've done a contradiction in terms that you cannot get around.

When I was in high school, I ran across a philosopher named Eric Hoffer, as some of you may know, but he's pretty old at this point. He was a long shoreman, who just did philosophy as he... I don't know if he believed in God or not, but he was talking about this idea that Jesus is saying, *"Love your neighbor is yourself."*

He says,

"The remarkable thing is that we really love our neighbor as ourselves. We do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant of others when we are tolerant of ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves. We are prone to sacrifice others when we're ready to sacrifice ourselves."

The first reason we forgive is so that we can leave the past. When we're caught in a grudge, it's like we're trapped in something that happened a long time ago, or at least happened in the past. We find ourselves emotionally stuck there looking at our present lives. We feel this wall between us and other people, a wall between us and anything joyful or happy. Forgiveness is letting go of the past, so you can come into the joy of a new day. Again, you don't do that in a fell swoop. But every inch you move towards that being here now, will change you and change the world.

The second insight that I think is there in the story is... Let's look at the next, you'll be happy, this is a Buddhist text. This is what I have to work with. Bunch of... Christianity is not the only religion that has a Sermon on the Mount type text.

Dhammapada (of Buddhism) 1:1-5

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robbed me.” Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred. “They abused me, they struck me, the overpowered me, they robbed me.” Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred. Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.

This is the Dhammapada of Buddha, and it's beautiful. It's one of the great treasures of the world. So is the Bhagavad Gita. There's around the world, there are lots and lots of people that teach us how to love.

Buddha says, *“The mind proceeds all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind, a person speaks or acts suffering follows them like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox. Mind proceeds all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind, a person speaks or acts, happiness follows them like their never departing shadow. “They abused me, they struck me, they overpowered me, they robbed me.” Those who harbor such thoughts do not still, do not quiet, their hatred. “They abused me, they struck me, they overpowered me, they robbed me.” Those who do not harbor such thoughts still, or quiet, their hatred. Hatred is never are appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.”*

Do you recognize that quote? My guess is that Martin Luther King took the Dhammapada when he was in prison. Because that's the quote. That's from the *Strength to Love*. Hate cannot cast out hate. Only love can do that. Darkness cannot cast out darkness. Only light can do that.

I love that image when we let this storm take place in our mind, unhappiness follows us like our own shadow. We cannot have a hateful mind and be happy, peaceful people, which means the people that we resent so much are already in hell. Donald Trump has more money than any of us can imagine. He's the most powerful man in the world, and he's one of the most miserable figures I've ever seen. He stays up at night doing tweets on people that have said things.

If we love, we're in heaven. If we hate, we're in hell. I don't think either one is a place. I think they're states of mind. So, forgiveness means letting go of the pain. We're never happy when we hate somebody. And, if you think about that enough, you realize that you don't want to do that to yourself. No matter how much of a creep the person has been, you don't want to pump poison in your bloodstream, which is what that stuff is.

Let's look at the definition of... Can we switch the slide? I forgive you for... See, I knew it was going to come back to get me. Whenever I do a sermon on something like that, it's like I have to put it in practice. *[laughter]* I don't want you to know what a hypocrite I am.

Definition of “Forgive”

Aphiemi (ἀφίημι)

“This word carries the sense of letting go or releasing something, whether it's a debt, a burden, or a person.”

Definition of “Forgive”. This is one of the words that's used there. The “*word carries the sense of letting go or releasing something, whether it's a debt, a burden, or a person.*” It's just cutting off something that's hurting you, that's an imprisoning you. And again, we privatize the message. When Jesus starts off his ministry by saying, “*I've come to preach the year of God,*” that's Jubilee. He was declaring the year of Jubilee, where you redistribute the goods. Where people have blown their life and they're in poverty, they're released from the poverty. If they've lost their land, the land is restored. If you take the politics out of what Jesus is teaching, then you have to fill it in by making God a creep. You have to say the cross was an angry God punishing Jesus, or a very powerful devil.

I think Paul used some of those images to help people with dying religion get out of the trap they were in. But what the church has done is give us a God that we can't love, we can fear, we can obey. But how do you love somebody who tortures people for all time? You can't.

To be in the church means to join a movement that gives itself to the whole world. Forgiveness also means letting go of all of the definitions that separate us from other people. It means having a part of yourself that isn't American, that's a human being first. That isn't Christian, it's a human being first. That isn't a capitalist, it's a human being first.

Jesus came to heal the world, not just get people in heaven, but to heal the world, to make it on earth as it is in heaven. Every time we forgive other people, in this sense, we heal the world, we heal ourselves, and sometimes we even heal other people.

When the topic of forgiveness comes in, I hope you won't feel guilt, because it's hard to be a human being. There's sometimes when this is just impossible. We're too hurt, we're too angry, we're too frustrated. But when we come to ourselves, to realize that when we cut ourselves free from those things, there's a joy in life that we can't have when our buttons are being pushed by other people.

So, forgiveness means, first of all, letting go of the past so you can come into the new day and enjoy the beauty. So, if you're caught in a grudge, wiggle your toes, wiggle your fingers, come back to the present moment. And realize this is your true life. To let go of the pain. We can't help it when something is hurting us, but we can not replay the tapes years and years later and re-injure ourselves more than the person did. Then finally, we can let go of anything that gives us tunnel vision that cuts us off from our human family. Because the church is a community that's given itself to the service of the entire human family.

I want to close with a quote. It's by Buddhists, so you all will be able to amplify it. This is Jack Cornfield. I know a lot of you all love him.

“In the end, only three things matter: how well we have lived, how well we have loved, and how well we have learned to let go.”

That's my understanding of the text. We'll take a moment I'd love for you to think about how you would understand these words.

Communion

I hope all the new people realize you don't have to agree with how I present sermons or rituals or anything like that, that if this rocks your boat and you can't go along with it, follow your own wisdom, not mine. But I think we understand sermons in terms of symbols of wisdom. They're not facts, they're not definitions. They're symbols of the dynamics of life.

Rituals are about art. They're about things you have to feel to get there. This ritual has been passed down. It doesn't just belong to Christianity. It started in Egypt to the extent that we know. But in our version of it, a young man has been condemned to die. I mean, it's not official yet, but it's very clear he's going to die. So he's taught people love his whole life, but the empire is going to shut him down. He wants to prepare his followers for that inevitability.

I think in the conditions we're in right now, this is really close to home, because we don't know where the fascism in the United States will lead. Hopefully, people will come to their senses. But right now, the Republican Party is going to cover up anything. They don't even want to know if he's a pedophile. If you didn't think he was a pedophile, you would want the files out. Anybody would. We'll probably lose Bill Clinton. That's, you know, trade. *[laughter]*

But the point is there has to be something deeper than the politics and the storm and the turmoil. Moses challenged the Pharaoh, so you have to be political. The first instruction God gives is, *Let my people go*. You can't take the politics out. You just have to take the partisanship out. We have to be looking for principles that would be good for everyone, principles that go across the divide.

Jesus is going to give people a piece of art to help them. I was taught in Sunday school and in seminary that Jesus died physically and his body rose again. That's one possibility. What seems more likely to me is that Jesus rises again in the church. Communities that love, communities that embody what he taught, contain his spirit and take his message into the future. I was taught that the grape juice and the crackers become the body and blood of Christ. That doesn't make sense to me. I think the purpose of a ritual is to help us see the sacred in the ordinary. What I'm hoping is you'll look at your life, and the question is not to agree with me, but to go into your own life and find something sacred that animates you.

On the night that Jesus was to be betrayed, he took bread. *[Jim turns to the Communion table and picks up the loaf of bread]* Now, imagine you were there, and you've been following this guy, and he takes up the bread and he said, "I want you to imagine this is my body. Then I want you to take it and I want you to break it. This will represent my death. I won't be with you much longer. But I want each of you to take a piece of it, because you suffer, too. You get afraid, too. But when all of you share in this ritual, I will be there when you love each other, I will be there because that's what I was teaching you all along. When you love each other, I'm resurrected in the community."

[Jim turns and returns to the Communion table, picks up the flask and goblet, turns back and pours from the flask to the goblet.] Progressives don't like the blood stuff, and I'm not crazy about it.

But to oppressed people, it's very important to know their suffering is not in vain. That if blood is shed, there's a love more powerful, more basic. That the love is never at stake. She said, "I want you to take this cup, and I want you to imagine it filled with my blood, because I'm giving everything to you. But the cup also represents a covenant of new life. It's a promise that nothing can separate you, that love is stronger than suffering. Whenever you take this bread, you will never again hunger. Whenever you drink this cup, you will never again thirst".

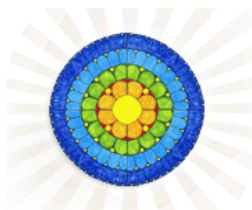
Would the servers come down? *[Jim distributes the baskets of Communion elements to the servers]* I've been doing this for 40 years, and I've never done it right once. *[laughter]* That's sad. That's sad, I think. Everyone is invited. If you're not comfortable, we also have candles to light, and you're welcome to stay where you are. But thank you for being a part of this.

Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

Leave here today knowing that you are loved. We can't forgive and love others if we can't love ourselves. Sometimes it's hard. Go out into nature if you struggle with it. For God loves everything in nature. And being there may be helpful in loving yourself. And know that the deep love for you that brought you into this world The love that goes with you every second, and that the love that will bring you home at the end are always with you, always inside you, and always around you. Amen.

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



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