

Rev. Susie Putzke  
The 4 Things That Matter Most: Forgiveness  
Matthew 18:21–35

We find ourselves in a unique time in the world where the things that separate us and divide us seem to be ever accumulating. The focus of conversations has in some ways shifted from what unites us to the things that separate and divide. We wanted to try a sermon series that brought us all to a shared focus of the things that matter most which is kind of brave actually as how could we possibly all agree on the content, but there are some common human factors that set the tone for getting the most out of our relationships.

Today we begin a journey through four sacred phrases that Dr. Ira Byock outlines in his book, *“The Four Things that Matter Most.”* These come from what Dr. Byock discovered in his work with patients as a Palliative Care Physician. Seeing and meeting many individuals and their families faced with their own mortality in times of critical transition. He has found the four phrases that matter most to include; “Please forgive me,” “I forgive you,” “Thank you,” and “I love you,” and we will spend some time around the art and practice of goodbye as well. He insists—and I believe—that these phrases are not just for our final moments but for our living. Spoken sincerely and practiced often they have the power to heal, transform, and bring peace to our lives and our relationships.

So in the drawing of straws, I guess I pulled the short one, and get to preach about forgiveness first. Unless any of you want to come up here and take a go at it?

I am guessing most of us here today have at some point and time in our lives had our feelings hurt by someone. I got a lot of these experiences in early on, first by surviving middle school and then throughout High School and College while serving as a waitress in various establishments. Whether it was the small town cafe or the popular chain restaurant I worked in through college, I found myself often the brunt of people’s bad days and anger. You can imagine over what, (*someone’s eggs done over hard as opposed to over easy*). Or someone deciding to holler that their food was taking far longer than they had time to wait... Yes... I was the server who went in to the walk in cooler to cry on multiple occasions.

It feels awful to be the brunt of another’s frustration and it feels terrible to be misunderstood. Though this is a fairly mild example of hurt and pain, I hope it is helpful in the sense that we don’t have to carry the entire weight of it on our own. I trust in addition to our smaller sized hurts we each carry some pretty big ones with us.

Experiences of a time in which someone has intentionally harmed us, or went for the buttons they knew would open our wounds or said the thing that left us feeling small. And for as many of us that are in this space we can trust there is a multitude of hurts as well. Some of us perhaps finding this place for that specific time and purpose. As a church we know there is hurt here and in our community. So we made being a trauma responsive church a priority. As people of faith

we hold forgiveness as a value in part because we likely have experienced healing from offering it and because we ourselves have been recipients of God's grace and mercy and that comes with so many benefits.

Here at Love first we don't have all that is required to take away the pain of the world, but we are committed to come along side one another with compassion and empathy. Many of us understand this call to forgive to be as difficult as it is critical. Last year Sojourners magazine shared an article titled "Why are Christians so bad at forgiveness?" The impetus for this article was from an individual who found themselves walking into church on Sunday morning for a class on the Lord's prayer, sharing that they realized they didn't know how to "forgive others" as God had forgiven" them. The article shares that;

**Defining forgiveness as "moving past and forgetting harm" was vague and hard to fathom. I had repeatedly seen the powerful weaponize the instruction to "forgive" against the oppressed and abused: Black people told to "forgive" the U.S. for slavery; Wives told to "forgive" husbands who abused them; survivors of sexual violence told to "forgive" the church. Surely, this was not the forgiveness Jesus instructed. But I couldn't escape the feeling that "forgive" was still a command for Christians to follow.**

The Article has two main points the first being that the work of forgiveness is hard work. All too often we think it ought to be something easy. Sometimes we even associate forgiving with forgetting. In today's parable about the King who decides to settle accounts with all his servants. We can imagine the work required when he encounters a particular servant who owes him a great deal of money and who still is unable to pay.

We hear how the servant pleads and begs that his debt be forgiven and though we don't get all the details of how long this conversation takes and the specific words exchanged, we can imagine the amount of effort required to grant that level of forgiveness. But it is granted! However, in no way is the memory of that debt forgotten.

We actually see evidence of this quite quickly when that very same servant who had his debt forgiven encounters a servant of his own that owes him money, and is asked for the same pardon. And for whatever reason he is unable or unwilling to extend the same level of forgiveness to his own servant.

Perhaps it was the memory of his own experience that kept him feeling too vulnerable to extend that same grace to someone else.

Perhaps it was fear that in a day or two the other shoe might drop and the King would change his mind about the grace he extended to him and call on him to pay it all over again. Maybe we make it too hard to forgive by thinking we have to forget.

A second key aspect of forgiveness is that it is active, I would even say ongoing. It is something we do, think and feel. And might be something that we do, think and feel over and over again. Forgiveness has been described as a courageous way of saying "Enough is enough!" It requires us to confront the imperfections and pain of the past, not ignore or excuse them. It invites us to see the origins of these hurts with compassion so we can again experience the love that is our birthright.

Dr. Byrock writes how "the words *Please forgive me and I forgive you* can be the bridge that reestablishes connection and allows healing to happen. The permission- the requirement- to begin to treat oneself with patience, acceptance, and love, and so to treat others likewise.

We can imagine how important these words could be to someone nearing the end of their life, but to name how the act or even the practice of forgiveness might be healing to us now is also helpful.

Jesus knew that it's not an easy thing for us to do which is why there are so many parables. Jesus did his best to be really creative in the examples he gave us that challenge how we might think about living this out in practice. If the debts of servants won't do it, maybe the parable of throwing stones will, maybe sheep, maybe vine and branches, maybe the prodigal son, maybe scales, fig trees. Jesus really wanted it to grab and hold fast to some understanding of forgiveness so that we would have opportunity to experience peace and release. Again, it is not denying our hurt or pretending the hurt didn't happen, but practicing grace and mercy with others and ourselves.

Just like the servant in the scripture reading today the thought of experiencing true forgiveness feels quite vulnerable. We don't always trust our ability to achieve it or receive it. As in scripture our lives carry with them multiple stories of forgiveness.

And we can call upon the stories from our own lives and the places our hearts have had to stretch and heal that likely lead to many questions about the topic. One being, what if I fail at forgiveness? What if I don't do it right? Byock's response is "as long as you are clear and positive in your intentions, you have nothing to fear and nothing to lose."

Friends God has been positive about God's intention for us from the get go. The Grace that we have been extended by and through God in Christ is a benefit we get to reap over and over again. So in those times where we feel unanchored in who we are, or we hear a comment that shakes our sense of being and worth, let us be reminded of the God who is a constant in our lives. A God who only wants good things for us: including that peace that passes all understanding. And may we work to see that goodness and Goodness in those around us.

Will we miss the mark or mess up? Sure. Will there be times and situations and conflicts and conversations that feel out of our control. Absolutely. But what we can do from this day forward, is to live as authentically as possible. Doing our best to remove the masks we use to protect ourselves from the world, step out of the walk in coolers and let ourselves be truly seen for who we are. May we see ourselves and each others as beloved children of God worthy of love and grace time and time again.

While serving as your pastor I have gotten to be present with some of our members at the end of their life. It has always been a sacred honor and privilege and a time in which that veil between heaven and earth seems so incredibly thin. But even while working at the hospital when I would find myself at the bedside of someone I am meeting for the first time, I could always speak one thing with great integrity. Beloved child of God. Beloved child of God. Friends we have and will continue to be faced with hard things, and my hope is that, in these moments, the anger we have felt or experienced from others dissolves into love and appreciation and affection for one another. That even if it takes us 77 times or 70x7 (as other translations say). That we will continue the active challenge of approaching forgiveness with love so that we can pave whatever future feels most authentic, healthy and whole for each of us.

Again...So much of our conversations around the table right now are the pains of the world and things that divide us. We are called to connect with our shared faith and shared values and practice the work of forgiveness.