

# Before Forgiveness

A 12-part Bible Study Series

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## 1. Introduction

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. Luke 11:9 [All scripture is from the NRSV unless otherwise noted]

### **Read: Luke 11:1-13**

This passage begins with the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray. The disciples had seen Jesus pray, and they knew they needed help to pray like he did. Jesus gives them a short prayer, which we call The Lord's Prayer. It includes the lines, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

Where in the life of Jesus does this prayer come? Why is forgiveness so much on Jesus's mind here in Luke 11? Luke 9 gives us a window into Jesus's thinking: there he tells the disciples that he is going to suffer, be rejected and killed. Then he says, "Let these words sink into your ears, the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands" (Luke 9:44).

Jesus is living with this harsh reality that awaits him--it has sunk into him. Jesus had seen crucifixions before, he can imagine what lies in store for him, and who will betray him. It is in this context that he teaches the disciples about praying, and forgiveness is on his mind.

### **A Life Challenge**

In this bible study, I am going to be concentrating on the big forgiveness challenges in our lives. At some point, we all experience great pain at the hands of other human beings. Maybe it's the pain of sexual abuse by a family member. Maybe your best friend was killed by a drunk driver. Maybe your spouse broke their marriage vows. A business partner cheated you financially. Because of the colour of your skin, you've experienced the thousand cuts of racist remarks. Society disadvantaged you because of your disability, and you are forced to live in poverty. You witnessed atrocities from rampaging militias and fled your country. Or maybe the mother who was supposed to love and nurture you was cruel and manipulative.

While our suffering varies in degree and duration, every human being carries scars of pain at the hands of other human beings. One of life's challenges is trying to figure out what to do with that pain. Jesus models forgiveness as a response to betrayal.

But forgiveness isn't easy. It's hard, it's elusive, it can seem impossible. We may pray the Lord's prayer every day and feel no closer to forgiveness.

### **A tricky Anabaptist heritage**

I am a Mennonite, which is a Christian denomination that is part of the Anabaptist tradition. Originating in the 1500s in Europe, this reform movement encouraged people to follow Jesus,

and live their lives according to scripture. Anabaptists are a part of the peace church tradition, which believes that Christians should not respond violently to violence. One of the things Anabaptists also emphasize is forgiveness. In our tradition, we are told stories of martyrs from the 1500s who forgave their persecutors; we are encouraged to forgive like they did.

Contemporary stories of forgiveness are also often told in the Anabaptist tradition. In 2006, in the Amish community of West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a gunman entered a school, took hostages, and then shot numerous schoolgirls, killing five. The Amish community immediately publicly forgave the perpetrator (who died by suicide after the shootings), and reached out to his family with compassion. The remarkable forgiving response of a community to a horrific crime became news around the world. I have heard that story told in church numerous times, as an example of how we should forgive others.

Stories that are less famous, but also important, need to be told. Torah Bontrager grew up in an Amish community, where she experienced terrible physical and sexual abuse. She talks about young women being forced to publicly ask their abusers for forgiveness because they tempted them to sin. Both the survivor of abuse and the person who raped them were punished with excommunication for six weeks, after which no one was allowed to talk about what happened.

Two stories about forgiveness, out of the same Amish tradition. One story is held up as a model for us to follow, but the other story is rarely told. Bontrager was tempted to kill herself because she saw no way out. Instead she escaped her community and now [has written](#) about her horrific experiences.

Forgiveness can be a remarkable gift that gives life, and it can be used as a weapon to silence hurting people, and keep them in vulnerable positions so they can be hurt again.

### **Faith seeking understanding**

We are all at different places with the betrayals we've faced. Some have felt forgiveness flow through them like a gift. Others see forgiveness in the distance, on the other side of a great chasm, and don't know how to get there. Some have had coaching from a community to think in healthy ways about forgiveness; in other communities teachings about forgiveness produce a sense of failure or shame or hopelessness. Teachings about forgiveness can endanger people's lives.

When people hurt us, big emotions like rage, anger and despair can fill us. It can be hard to square this with sermons that talk about forgiveness as a simple equation. Theology happens when we start to ask questions about forgiveness. What sets the stage for forgiveness? Where can forgiveness go wrong? When is forgiveness most likely to happen?

In this study we'll be looking at some familiar biblical stories about forgiveness, as well as some passages of scripture that you may not have associated with that concept. You will have an opportunity to think about your own life and the journeys you are on. If you are doing this

study with someone else, I hope that together you can be vulnerable with one another. We don't have all the answers about forgiveness.

If you have a happy story of forgiveness, you may want to tell that. It can be a gift from God that you want to share. However too often only the happy stories are told in public. By only telling our success stories, we set up unrealistic standards about forgiveness, and minimize how hard forgiveness can be. I think most Christians deep down have someone they have not forgiven. It's hard to talk about the places where we find ourselves at square one in the forgiveness journey.

What we do have is a promise from Jesus that if we ask questions about forgiveness, we will be given some answers. If we search diligently, God will show us the way. The door to God's presence will open if we knock. Let's begin together.

Stories told in a bible study group are confidential. They are a gift that is shared with you, and you should treasure it. It is not yours to share with others, with or even without names.

### **Wonderings:**

Spend a few moments in quiet reflection, each thinking about some hard stories in your life where you have found it difficult to forgive (you will not be asked to share these).

Then together think about how forgiveness has been talked about in church. Have you heard preachers share great success stories about forgiveness?

Have you ever heard a preacher share a story of how they were unable to forgive?

When you think about your own life, do success stories about forgiveness leave you feeling inspired, or do they leave you feeling inadequate?

## 2. The God who Sees Me

Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, "You are the God who sees me." Genesis 16:13 [New Living Translation]

### **Read: Genesis 16:1-16**

Hagar was an enslaved person, the lowest of the low. We don't know anything about her history, other than that she was Egyptian. Why was she so far from home? Was she captured in a raid, or sold for a debt? We do know she was displaced and alone, far from the family and people who could have protected her.

Hagar was forced to work for Sarai, and had no say when Sarai told her to go and have sex with Abram. She could not consent, she was enslaved.

At a certain point some time later, Hagar decides she can't take it anymore. She takes her life, and the life of her unborn baby, in her hands, and runs away. There, in the wilderness, Hagar meets an angel who tells her that God has plans for her and her child, and promises that they will prosper. Hagar responds by naming God, "The God who sees me." She is the first person in scripture to give God a name.

Many people are bothered by the fact that the angel tells Hagar to go and submit to Sarai. How come the "escape plan" that the angel offers means returning to her abusers? Why couldn't God have led Hagar to a Promised Land of her own? What do you think Sarai's reaction was to a runaway slave that comes back? Other stories of slavery we know can pretty well guarantee that Hagar wasn't welcomed like the prodigal son. Did the abuse stop, or did the abuse intensify? We aren't told this part of the story.

What we do know is that the Hagar who went into the wilderness is not the same Hagar who comes back. Now she knows that God is watching her, and has promised great things to her and her son. Sarai is no longer the most powerful force in Hagar's life.

### **The broken-hearted**

This isn't a bible story that people normally use to explain forgiveness, because forgiveness isn't part of the story. The angel doesn't say to Hagar, "Forgive Sarai."

But there is a great truth in this story that impacts our ability to forgive. God sees our pain, especially the pain of the neglected, the downtrodden, the powerless, and the overlooked. God sees the tears, and hears the anguished cries, the moans into pillows. God is there with the distraught, the distressed and the wounded. God has plans even for the wounded Hagar. Plans that involved hope. Even though everyone Hagar knew thought she was the lowest of the low, God valued her.

I think of a friend who I will call Therese. From the time she was a little girl, Therese's mother physically and emotionally abused her. I think of little Therese cowering in her room, with nowhere to turn, with no one to help her. She had years of suffering ahead, she could not imagine a life without her mother hurting her.

Jesus sees people like Therese who are really hurting. The disabled man who cannot get into the pool and so is always missing the chance for healing. The blind man who is labelled a sinner. The woman caught in adultery, about to be stoned by men, the man who she was with perhaps even hiding in the crowd with a stone in his hand.

Hagar's story makes it into the Bible. And if God sees her, God sees all the broken-hearted. God cares about our pain.

### **A broader vision**

When people hurt others, they objectify them, and treat them as less than human. That is the very basis of enslavement; I enslave you because I think you are less than me. I can sexually abuse you, because I don't value you. It is very common for hurt people to absorb that objectification, and to think badly of themselves, sometimes believing they deserve what they are getting.

I wonder if that was Hagar's reality. I can imagine Sarai screaming at her, "You worthless slave!" Imagine hearing that not once, but your whole life, from everyone around you. What happens in the wilderness is that Hagar realizes she is worthy of God's notice. She is no longer defined by the people who abuse her.

Perhaps the most important step towards forgiveness is this reorientation that takes the power away from the abuser. Instead of being an object, the hurt person is now the beloved. When they know their belovedness in their soul, perhaps only then can forgiveness begin to dawn on the horizon.

### **Community as an angel of God**

How do people get a message from God? I think of my friend Therese, physically abused by her mother, living in fear. What saved her? When she went to church as a young adult, the community welcomed her and embraced her. They taught her she was a beloved child of God. When Therese felt safe enough to tell her story, they could say, "We hear your pain. This was wrong, this should not have happened. We will help you get through this." The community was an angel of God for her.

The church, when they heard her story, did not immediately say, "Therese, you should forgive your mother." Instead, they sat with Therese in her pain and sorrow. It took months for the stories of abuse to trickle out of Therese's broken past. They cherished her.

This new church family gave Therese the safe space she needed. She could feel at home in a way she had not felt at home in her whole childhood. After living in this safe space for several years, the idea of forgiving her mother began to dawn on Therese's horizon.

**Wonderings:**

Have you had the experience of someone truly listening to your deep pain? How was that a healing experience?

When someone hurts you, have you ever felt they were trying to define who you were?

How can God's love or the love of a supportive community short-circuit the power relationship with the person who harmed you?

### 3. Repentance: Turning Around

Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Luke 15:21

**Read: Luke 15:11-32**

This parable is one of the most frequently quoted stories when we talk about forgiveness. As I've heard this story used in the Anabaptist tradition, the emphasis is mostly on the father's forgiving actions. We focus on the father's open arms and loving attitude.

Yet in the gospel of Luke, this story is about repentance. Jesus has just told the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin and spoken of the "joy in heaven over sinners who repent." The prodigal son has not only seen but felt the error of his ways in his empty belly. His lifestyle has left him impoverished, and in the environment of the pigsty he has found time to think about what his actions meant to his father.

The son isn't coming back saying, "I have nowhere to go, and I'm poor, will you take me in?" It's not, "I've run out of money." That would be a simple appeal to his father's compassion. Instead, he actually has realized the error of his ways. He has used the money exploiting prostitutes, which is a sin against God. He says, "I have sinned against heaven and before you." The son returns home repentant.

The father may have embraced the son without repentance, it's hard to say. However Jesus is telling the story in the context of teaching about repentance.

#### **Turning is more than words**

The Greek word translated as repentance in this story, *metanoia*, means a fundamental change in thinking that leads to a fundamental change in behaviour. It's not just an idea about change, but a change of purpose. Repentance is always about more than your words.

Repentance was central to Jesus's teaching. In Matthew 4:17, shortly after his baptism and the forty days in the wilderness, Jesus begins to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He did not mean that people should only think in their heads, "I've done something wrong." Jesus wanted people to change the way they behaved. Think about the story of Zacchaeus, who on hearing Jesus preach says, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

Repentance that only uses words is shallow. Take for example, the great sin of racism. A white person can say, "I'm sorry I was racist," but their actions will show whether they truly have turned. Repenting of racism means that you need to listen to Black people and people of colour



as they explain their experiences of racism. It means not only stopping your own racist acts and remarks, but also becoming more aware of the privilege you have as a white person in our society. It can mean using your power to advocate when you see racism at work. Repentance is not a one-time event, but a change in direction.

### **Actions and Memorials**

The Mennonite community in the Ukraine suffered greatly under the government of Josef Stalin in the 1930s. Military police arrested many Mennonite men, and they were never heard from again. They were the “disappeared.” Some were sent to Siberian work camps, where they died of overwork and starvation. Some were shot in the police yard. But their families were not told what happened to them. Over 30,000 Mennonites disappeared in the 1930s.

In 2006, I was in the Ukraine when [a monument](#) was dedicated to these 30,000 disappeared people. The stone monument shows silhouettes of a man, a woman and two children. On the base of the monument in Ukrainian, Russian, German and English, is Matthew 5:14, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Mennonites funded this statue, but they received full co-operation from the Ukrainian government, and Ukrainian officials were there when it was dedicated.

Over seventy years had passed so the Ukrainians who were helping to dedicate this monument were not the same people who had worked in the police station and shot the arrested men. But the government was doing something important, they were admitting that atrocities had happened.

Too often governments try to cover up the mistakes of the past. They don’t dig up the mass graves, they burn the records, they try to rewrite their history to glorify the past and not expose its ugly underbelly. But the Ukrainian government was admitting that terrible things happened. They didn’t just help dedicate a memorial, they opened up archives, and allowed researchers to look for information. Families finally had an answer. They saw recorded in black and white, that their loved one was executed on a certain date, or died in a prison camp. Closure could finally happen.

The memorial that we dedicated that day did not take away the pain of the disappeared, but it is a public form of repentance, a way of saying, “This should not have happened, and we don’t want it to happen again.”

### **God moving in us**

There is a difference between remorse and repentance. Remorse is an immediate pang. I do something wrong, and I feel bad. I may feel bad because I was caught, or I may feel bad because I wish I hadn’t made that mistake. I feel bad because I am in trouble. Repentance is something different, it’s something deeper, it takes more time.

I remember I hurt a friend by saying something negative about her. Almost immediately I felt remorse. But repentance came more slowly. As I saw the pain my words had caused, I started to empathize with her. Over months and years, the pain I caused helped me reflect on my own character, and why I said what I did. Repentance turned me around. I did apologize for what I did, but I also was much more careful about the words I said going forward. One of the most important steps before forgiveness is repentance.

### **Wonderings**

If you were taught the prodigal son story, what was emphasized, the forgiveness of the father or the repentance of the son?

Can you think of practical examples of repentance in your community? How were words involved, and how were actions involved?

Think of a time where you were repentant, how did that repentance grow?

How might repentance set the stage for forgiveness?

## 4. Accountability

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. Matthew 23:4

### **Read: Matthew 23:1-12**

In this passage of scripture Jesus is talking to the people who are bearing heavy burdens. Throughout his time on earth, Jesus was particularly concerned with those who were suffering. He listened to the people on the margins, the people with leprosy who were cast out, the people with disabilities who gathered together around a healing pool, even foreign women like the woman at the well in Samaria. These people carried the burden of being labelled unclean, or unimportant, or outsiders.

In this scripture passage, we hear about the pain of people who have to follow the many rules that religious leaders make. The rules are so burdensome that few can follow them. The religious leaders here are named as scribes and Pharisees. This passage goes on to describe the “woes” that will fall upon these leaders.

When we read this story, we must remember how this passage has been used in Christian history. Christians have used Matthew 23 to justify persecuting Jews and killing them in pogroms and genocide. Jesus is not calling for violence here. What he is calling for is accountability.

It’s notable that Jesus does not tell the suffering people, “You must forgive the Pharisees.” In other places, Jesus does teach that God’s love and forgiveness extends to all people. Here he is holding people accountable for the hurt they’ve done.

Accountability does not negate forgiveness. Accountability and forgiveness can go hand in hand. In fact, accountability can set the stage for forgiveness.

### **Who is bringing up the topic of forgiveness?**

In our world today, too often it is the people who have hurt others who bring up the topic of forgiveness. The powerful do not want to talk about what happened. They don’t want to explore the consequences that come from their offensive behaviour. They simply want that action to disappear by having the victim forgive them. Asking for quick forgiveness can be a way of avoiding accountability for the harm done.

In Canada and the United States, white settlers came and stole the land from indigenous peoples. They did this in the name of God and their kings and queens. They did everything they could to destroy the culture and heritage of indigenous peoples, including stealing generations of children and putting them in residential schools. On the great plains, they committed

genocide not just by murdering tribes with military troops but also through starvation; white people killed the great herds of buffalo for the express purpose of starving the people who relied on them for food.

When the topic of indigenous land rights comes up, too often white people are ready to say, “That happened so long ago, why are you are still talking about that?” Christians have often suggested that indigenous peoples need to forgive and move on: “Don’t dwell in the past!”

Except the past is not passed. The consequences of the giant land grab are still being felt, as reserves were confined to small, often inferior spaces, while white families became prosperous on the land they took. White people still own the land they stole. The racism that prompted the stealing of the land continues, and indigenous people face racist comments, actions and policies every single day. If white people preach about forgiveness to indigenous people, it is a way of trying to avoid accountability for the harm done.

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was a public forum from 2008 to 2015 where First Nations peoples could name the harm done to them for all to hear. I participated in some of these meetings, and we were on holy and painful ground as we listened to the devastating stories. So many tears were shed.

One of the many rituals surrounding this storytelling at the TRC was that the tissues filled with tears were collected and ritually burned, the smoke offered to the Creator. Tears were sacred in this space. Listening to the stories was the first step towards accountability.

There were many [recommendations](#) coming from the TRC, and Canada has been slow in following them. But some are being implemented, like changing the curriculum in public schools to include teaching about residential schools. This way the next generation will learn about the harm done—it’s a way of holding Canada accountable. We will not forget this horrible chapter in our history.

## **Bringing it home**

We see this same power dynamic at work on a smaller scale in family settings. When abused children grow up and confront their parent with the harm that was done, too often the first thing Christian parents will say is, “You have to forgive us.”

When pastors are caught in sexual misconduct with congregants, too often the first thing the pastor will do is say, “I want to be forgiven, you should forgive me.”

A Christian husband beats his wife, and terrorizes the family. The next day he says, “You need to forgive me for what happened yesterday.”

In each of these situations, the powerful person is demanding forgiveness. They have not asked, “How has this impacted you? How are you feeling? What are the consequences of my actions?”

They have not demonstrated repentance by naming their sins, "I have hurt you. It's my fault. I did terrible things, and this is what they were...."

And they have not shown accountability, which includes actions not just words: "You've had to go for counselling, I will pay for that." "I have hurt other people in the same way I've hurt you, and I need to go to them too." "This has been a terrible secret you have carried, I am going to tell my family that I hurt you, so they can hold me accountable in the future." "I have assaulted you, and I'm turning myself in to the police. I want you to be safe, so I am leaving till I get help for my problems."

### **Before forgiveness**

For people who are hurt, forgiveness can be a stone wall that they cannot scale. Accountability is like stairs that can help you get over the wall. When someone or a group of people who has hurt you shows accountability for what they've done, they are building a staircase that can lead to forgiveness in the future.

There are people who can leap over walls. It's sometimes possible in extraordinary circumstances. But most people need staircases. It's important for churches to be careful to preach about accountability, not just forgiveness.

### **Wonderings**

Is forgiveness a common topic in sermons you have heard? How often have you heard sermons on accountability?

If you are a white person, have you thought about forgiveness as an answer to the sins against indigenous peoples? If you are an indigenous person, have you been told to forgive by the people who are hurting you?

How could educating your church about the pain indigenous people suffer be a helpful response to this history?

Can you think of situations where a powerful person asked for forgiveness? Did they talk about accountability?

## 5. A Place of Safety

Then Joseph fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. Genesis 15:4

### **Read: Genesis 45:1-15**

Joseph meeting his brothers in Egypt is one of the most famous forgiveness stories in the Bible, even though the word forgiveness is not used. Centuries of Sunday school teachers imprinted the dramatic story of Joseph and his coat of many colours on the psyche of Christian children. Countless picture Bibles illustrated Joseph thrown into a pit, or being sold into slavery, his hands bound. We sympathize with Joseph and the horrible trauma he experienced at the hands of his brothers.

And so when the tables are reversed, and Joseph years later finds himself in Egypt in a position of power, how will he respond to his brothers? Interestingly, this touching scene where he reveals who he is does not happen when he first meets his brothers. He does not initially trust them; he wants to see what kind of characters they have become. In Genesis 43, Joseph sets a test for them. He keeps Simeon as a hostage, will they abandon Simeon too? When the brothers return with Benjamin, he sets another test, pretending that he wants to hold this brother hostage too. That's when Judah is willing to give his life for Benjamin, explaining that he cannot see his father suffer more pain. It's only at that point, when Joseph has tested them to see if they have changed, that he reveals who he is.

In this bible passage, Joseph explains why he can act the way he does. His life has turned out well. Surprisingly, the move to Egypt has turned to his advantage, and now he is very powerful, much more powerful than he ever would have been if he had grown up in a family with eleven brothers and one sister. It is from this place of prosperity and power that he can find the resources to forgive the brothers who so cruelly sold him into slavery those long years ago. The brothers have no power to hurt Joseph any more. This has set the stage for forgiveness to happen.

### **The reality of brokenness**

Unfortunately, most big betrayals in our lives do not bear good fruit. When the drunk driver kills your sister and her family, there is not going to be a time or place where you say, "This has all worked out for good." When you are sexually abused by an uncle, your whole childhood is shaped by terror and fear. Your innocence and childhood is gone. There is never going to be a time where you confront your uncle and forgive him saying, like Joseph, "This was all part of God's plan to bring about good things."

I had a friend named Rebecca (not her real name), who seemed to have a beautiful marriage. She had a charming husband, a beautiful baby and she was working on a degree at the

university. We were in the same class, and got to know each other. She invited me and my husband for dinner, and we had a wonderful time in their cozy apartment.

A few months later, when I saw Rebecca coming out of the washroom in the university library, she looked like she had been crying. I asked her whether she was OK.

She was not OK. Her story poured out, how her husband was verbally and physically abusive. Everything looked good on the outside, but when they were alone, he was mean and cruel. He punched her and slapped her and threw her around. He would apologize after the violence, and beg her to forgive him. She had, time and time again. They were maintaining the illusion of a happy Christian family at their church and with their extended family, but Rebecca was trapped in a cycle of abuse.

After a particularly violent attack that week, Rebecca ran out of her house with her baby, and fled to her parent's home. She told them everything that had happened. The next morning her mother sat Rebecca down and told her that it was her duty to go back to her husband. She told Rebecca that God would help her forgive him for his sin. Her mother was sure that eventually her husband would change if she loved him enough.

"I can't do this," Rebecca told me through tears. "I don't trust him, I am afraid all the time. And what if he hurts our baby?" Rebecca left her husband, without the support of her own family.

### **Unfair burden**

Tragically, Rebecca's story is very common in the Christian tradition. Abused women have been told to submit to the authority of the person who is hurting them, and forgive them.

In Western society, the feminist movement arose partly from these tragic realities. In the 1800s, women had no place to turn if they were abused; they had no rights to own property, and could not have custody of their own children. These are some of the first laws that the feminist movement sought to change. Once a woman could provide for herself and her children, she had options and was not always forced to remain in a violent environment.

But changing laws was not enough. There are societal pressures, largely from the church, that emphasize the sanctity of marriage. People have put a greater value on intact marriages than on intact bodies. Generations of women have been told by the church to preserve the marriage and forgive the harm being done to them. There has been less emphasis on accountability for the abuser, and more emphasis on the hurt person forgiving the one who has sinned. This is an unfair burden and it does not bear good fruit.

When the church preaches or advises forgiveness to people who are not safe, encouraging them to remain in a situation where they will continue to be hurt, we are complicit in the cycle of abuse.

## **Thinking about safety**

Colton grew up with two abusive older brothers. He was four years younger than them, and different. They were big and athletic, he was small and very short-sighted, needing thick glasses from a very young age.

Throughout his school years, his brothers bullied him mercilessly, physically tormenting him, wrestling him, holding his arm behind his back and putting him in chokeholds. For a long time he cried a lot and tried to get help from his mother. She told the boys they needed to say sorry. But she never addressed the violence in a serious way. As an adult, Colton looked back at his childhood saying, "My brothers really abused me, and I couldn't do anything about it, and my mother didn't know how to help me."

As Christians, we need to address the issue of safety. Telling people to say sorry, or asking victims to forgive, is not an adequate response to violence and abusive behaviour. Forgiveness should only be discussed after the question of safety has been carefully addressed.

## **Wonderings**

Did your parents or caregivers ever try to engineer forgiveness between you and your siblings, without addressing the harm that was done?

Can you think of someone who was told to forgive when they were still being hurt?

Have you ever really wanted someone to forgive you? Had you taken responsibility for the harm you did in concrete ways?



## 6. Walking Away

They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Luke 4:29-30

**Read: Luke 4:14-30**

This story happens at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry. Jesus has just come down the mountain from his temptation, and has begun preaching in Galilee to great success. And then he goes to his home town of Nazareth.

At first the people in his community thought Jesus spoke well, and admired his gracious words. But then he shares a message that God has and will help people beyond the Jewish tradition. This enrages them, and they drive Jesus out of town to the brow of the hill near Nazareth, to throw him off a cliff.

I have been to Nazareth, and climbed the hills around it. They are very large and steep, and not something you scramble up in a minute or two. Your legs get tired, you get out of breath. I can imagine the crowd murmuring and panting as they drag Jesus up and up. When they reach the summit something has changed, and "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

We don't often think about what this incident meant for Jesus. Nazareth was not a big place. These were not strangers rejecting him and his message. These are the people he grew up with: his school chums, friends of his parents, the people in his neighbourhood. They were angry enough that they were ready to kill him, and Jesus, held by their arms, was brought to the edge of the precipice. It must have been a terrifying experience. It's traumatic when someone tries to kill you.

What I find noteworthy is not just that Jesus walks away through this murderous crowd, it's that he walks away from Nazareth permanently (there is a story from Mark 6:1 where Jesus goes to Nazareth, but that might be another account of this same story). After they tried to kill him, Jesus doesn't move back home and face the same people day after day. He simply puts distance between himself and them.

### **Leaving Home**

I know quite a few people who experienced abuse in their family settings. For my friends who are Christians, they have felt enormous pressure from the larger family and their church to forgive the harm done and reconcile to the family members who hurt them. This pressure can come from the offending parties themselves, "You have to forgive me!"

For some of my friends, walking away from their family was the healthiest and safest option. They cut off communication with people who hurt them.

In my own life, I had a very troubled relationship with my stepmother. We had an intense and complicated relationship where I felt manipulated and emotionally abused, particularly in my teenage years when I lived alone with her after my father died.

The relationship did not get easier as I grew older. Often people say, "As you get older you start to appreciate your parents more!" I have found that the reverse is often true. As a child, you make excuses for abusive behaviour, and want desperately to believe that your parents love you, even when all evidence proves the opposite. It's only when you are safe and have other supports, that you can name the harm done.

As an adult, I always felt on guard in her presence, because she usually said very hurtful things to me. Her looks and comments would upset me for days. At a certain point in my early thirties, I broke off contact with my stepmother. This was a huge decision for me, and I felt enormously guilty about it as a Christian, because shouldn't good Christian daughters forgive and forget?

My pastor at the time knew my story, and the terrible weight I was carrying about this relationship. He reminded me of the story of the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17), and said, "This bad relationship has been weighing you down for so long, it could be time to let it go." His words gave me permission to take some space.

## **Family Ties**

In Palestine at the time of Jesus, family ties were very strong. As an eldest son, Jesus would have been expected to care for his mother. In Mark 3:31, his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters come and talk to him. There doesn't seem to be a father in the family anymore. There must have been social pressure on Jesus to stay and take care of Mary.

In many parts of the world today, people commonly move away from home to go to school or for job opportunities, or they meet and marry people far from their home. We may find it hard to understand the settled nature of the community to which Jesus belonged. For Jesus and his followers, giving up a settled life and travelling from place to place was breaking societal norms.

Jesus goes even farther when, in that same Mark 3 passage, he challenges the whole concept of family ties, saying, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He answers his own question: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus gives permission to think differently about family ties. He also creates a community of followers, instructing them to love each other. They are his "mother and brother and sisters." We often speak of "church family" precisely because of this teaching.

For people who have had to leave their abusive families, the church serves a very important function. In this safe space, we can feel loved and supported. A supportive church environment, and space from those who hurt you, can set the stage for forgiveness at a later point.

### **Wonderings**

Have you felt judgemental of people who have left their abusive families?

If your family was loving, imagine how your life would have been different if you had to flee from them to feel safe.

If your family was abusive, how did it feel to find new people to love and nurture you?

Jesus models a new community outside of the nuclear family...how does that challenge societal norms even today?

## 7. It Might Not Happen

But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. 2 Samuel 13:19

### **Read: 2 Samuel 13:1-22**

This is a story of rape, heartbreak and shattered dreams. It has been referred to as a “text of terror” by biblical scholar Phyllis Trible.

I am struck by the way power permeates this story. The men are powerful. Amnon and Jonadab plot and entrap. Amnon rapes. The male servant throws Tamar out and bolts the door. Her brother Absalom hears the story and starts plotting. All the men are using their power to do harm.

King David, the person who actually had the most power, heard what happened and did nothing. As the head of the family in that culture, he should have been the one to make sure that actions had consequences. After all, Amnon deceived the King himself, using him to order Tamar to bring food to his room. But King David did not use his power to bring justice. This sets the stage for Absalom’s actions; you can read about them in the rest of the chapter.

Even though Tamar is a princess, daughter of the king, her body is a pawn moved this way and that by the men in the story. But she does make decisions. With her virginity gone, she realizes that in that time and place her chances for a marriage and a family are destroyed, so she tries to salvage her future by appealing to Amnon to marry her. When he refuses, she could have gone quietly away, to hide and suffer in silence. Instead, she goes public with her grief. She puts ashes on her head, she tears her long robe, she puts her hand on her head. She has the power to tell her story, and she uses it. Everyone will know that something bad was done to her. She doesn’t fade away quietly.

What we don’t see in the Bible is any story of forgiveness between Tamar and Amnon. Delayed forgiveness sometimes happens in the Bible, like with the story of Jacob and Esau. Even though Jacob betrayed Esau, and Esau wanted to kill him, decades later there is a touching scene where they fall on each other’s necks. That does not happen here.

Amnon (spoiler alert) is murdered by Absalom. We are told that Tamar remains a desolate woman in the house of her Absalom. And a few chapters later Absalom himself is murdered. No one knows that happened to Tamar and the people in Absalom’s household. This is a story with no happy ending.

### **No Pretty Bows**

When I was a child, we had a hardcover book set called *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*. Each of the short stories had a different child getting into some moral problem, such as little Billy stealing something from the store, or little Sally hitting her friend. By the final page, Billy or Sally had confessed their sin and all was forgiven. Every single story was like that. All the stories ended so neatly, like a package with a pretty bow on it.

I am glad that the Bible is not like *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*, because life is not like that. Life is terribly messy, and human beings don't always follow a simple linear formula of sin, repentance, forgiveness. If the Bible only contained simple stories, where would we find ourselves?

Like Tamar, people can live their whole lives suffering the consequences of other people's evil actions and they never get an apology. Children are estranged from their parents, couples divorce, best friends never speak to each other again, communities are divided, countries become mortal enemies. It's the tragic nature of human life that Jesus came to save.

### **Living with unfinished business**

In some cases, like the story of Joseph we looked at earlier, life turns out OK for people who have been betrayed. Then forgiveness may not be so hard. But when the consequences have to be lived with day after day, what do we do then?

One of the great sins of the twentieth century was the Holocaust. The Nazi regime murdered six million people in death camps, mostly Jews, but also Roma people, queer people, priests, people with disabilities, as well as political prisoners. For many, this is a fact that they store away, a piece of knowledge about history. For others it is their great sorrow, as huge branches of their family tree were lopped off, their bodies incinerated in ovens.

For me, the holocaust has been a fact I know, but it has not touched me personally. The number six million is too big to really comprehend. A few years ago on the Twitter application on my phone, I started following @AuschwitzMuseum. Each day they give a name and show a picture of someone who was in that Nazi concentration camp. Some of the photos are mug shots in prison uniforms, but many are portraits from before the person was arrested. So each day I see the face and name and occupation of a 75 year old man, or a 35 year old woman, a 17 year-old teenager, or a toddler. Each day, face by face, six million people are becoming real to me. Almost all of them were murdered in a gas chamber.

I don't think there is forgiveness on this earth for crimes this big. There can be apologies by the German government, and there has been; there can be an attempt at reparations by returning stolen property, a bit of that has happened. But the lives are the important thing, and they were snuffed out. When I see the baby's face, I realize, "This woman would be 76 today, she should be looking back at her life and accomplishments, surrounded by family and friends."

One thing I am sure of is that forgetting is not the answer. Forgetting the harm done and just moving on is dangerous. On social media and in the news, I see writers scapegoating “Jewish elites” for world problems. Jewish schools and synagogues are defaced regularly. We can’t forget the danger of anti-Semitism, and where it leads.

Where is forgiveness? There is an old African-American spiritual titled “There is a Balm in Gilead.” The words go like this;

*There is a balm in Gilead, that makes the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead, that heals the sin-sick soul.*

Forgiveness can be the Promised Land that we are travelling towards, but we may not reach it in our lifetimes. We trust that God can heal this broken world, but it might be from beyond the grave.

### **Wonderings**

How do you feel when you think about sins that are “too big to forgive?”

We don’t talk about “unforgivable sins” very often in church, perhaps because we want stories like Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories, where everything is settled before we close the chapter.

Look at your church or community. Are there unsettled stories that haunt your community?

What effect do these stories have on you?

## 8. Forgive and Forget?

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. Matthew 9:9

**Read: Matthew 9:9-13**

When you think of the disciples of Jesus, they each were called from some profession. Some of them, like Peter, James and John, were fishermen. In our passage of scripture today, we see that Matthew also had a profession. He was a tax collector.

The job of a tax collector was to count money, and keep accounts. All day every day, he counted coins, keeping track of money coming in, and money going out, turning it over to the Romans. The Romans had sales taxes, property taxes, import and export taxes, and tolls on roads. Capernaum, where this story takes place, was on a great Roman trading road between Damascus and Caesarea, a port on the Mediterranean Sea, so Matthew would have had a lot of counting to do.

Roman taxes were not voluntary, and they were oppressive. Roman recruited local Jewish people to collect them. Tax collectors got paid by levying extra money on top of the Roman taxes. They had the power to write down who paid and who didn't pay, and they had the might of Roman soldiers behind them to punish those who didn't pay. Tax collectors were hated because they were seen as collaborators.

People complained that Jesus was eating with "tax collectors and sinners." We see those two categories of people put together several times in the gospels. It is from the tax desk that Jesus calls Matthew. He is willing to forgive Matthew's sin of oppressing the people by co-operating with Rome, and welcomes him into the band of disciples.

Jesus and his disciples did not work for wages during his ministry as far as we know, and lodging and food had to be bought. Jesus's ministry was financially supported by women (Luke 8:1-3), and there must have been substantial donations because then and now, it costs money to live.

Matthew was obviously the money expert, wouldn't it make sense to put him in charge of the money that Jesus and the disciples carried with them? Yet we know Jesus did not choose Matthew. It was Judas who controlled the purse for the group (John 12:6). If Jesus had forgiven Matthew his sin, why didn't he put him in charge of the money?

### **Living with history**

We don't know why Jesus made this choice, but I can wonder. I wonder whether Jesus did not want to put Matthew into temptation. Matthew had been drawn into the world of extortion; greed was a major problem for him. Holding a bag of donations might be too big a temptation

for Matthew. Old habits die hard, and he might be tempted to skim money off the donations, just as he skimmed money off the taxes.

But I also wonder whether it was for the donors' sakes that Jesus did not put Matthew in charge of the money. People had been resentfully giving their hard-earned money to Matthew for years, and he had taken advantage of them. Would people want to hand their donations for Jesus's ministry into Matthew's hand? How could they trust him?

Imagine if one of your church members, an accountant, committed crimes, and stole from her clients. If she was repentant, your church would want her to be forgiven. But would you elect her as treasurer for your church? If you've forgiven her, why wouldn't you let her be treasurer?

In the church we are careful about money, and we are very sensitive about honesty. People who have been in prison for cheating people out of money, are not given the opportunity to handle it again in church settings. We may truly believe they are reformed, but we don't put them in temptation's way. And if we want people to donate to the church, we want our financial people to be above reproach.

### **Being care-full**

In our communities we want to care for everyone. Caring can mean that we do not want to lead people into temptation, particularly in areas where they are known to be weak. You don't ask a friend who is a recovering alcoholic to pour the wine at your dinner party. You care for them, and so you want to keep them out of harm's way. You probably wouldn't even serve alcohol at the party if you knew they were coming.

Caring can also mean that we keep others out of harm's way. One of the areas I've studied extensively is pastoral sexual misconduct. When a complaint about sexual misconduct by a pastor is received, the church doesn't want to believe it. "How can our pastor, who is so wise and loving, have been so abusive?" Often churches blame the victim, or don't believe her. But if evidence is found in the investigation that something terrible did happen, what will the church do? Too often, churches will quietly ask for the resignation of the pastor. They tell him that he is forgiven, but that he can't stay. Sometimes they have even given him a good reference, so he can get another job.

People want to give the pastor another chance, "We don't want to ruin his life!" However, the pastor often goes on to another church, who doesn't know he has this problem of crossing sexual boundaries, and suddenly there are five more victims. What is more important, giving the pastor another chance, or putting people in harm's way? What is chilling is that the church does not trust him to be their pastor, but they are willing to give him a good reference, so that he can go on to abuse more people.



This sort of thing unfortunately has happened too often in the church. When we forgive someone, we want to give them second chances. But this lack of accountability, this “forgive and forget mentality” is dangerous.

If you were sexually abused by your father, you may have come to some sort of reconciliation with him. He may have admitted his sin, apologized, and you may even have forgiven him. But that does not mean that you will ask him to babysit your own children. That would be putting them in potential danger. Forgiving does not mean forgetting.

How we treat people who have harmed others is about accountability. Forgiveness does not mean we are naïve or insensitive to potential danger. It means we can be as “wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves”(Matthew 10:16). We balance forgiveness with wariness. We create a culture around forgiveness that makes our communities safer.

### **Wonderings**

Can you think of a time where “forgiving and forgetting” meant more people got hurt? Here is a scenario, what would you do? Jeffrey is a young man who has been in three serious car accidents in the past two years, all his fault. He likes to drive too fast. Now he has volunteered to drive the van for the youth retreat. Your group has to decide whether to accept his offer. Would you let him? What are the things you are balancing as you make your decision, and how does forgiving and forgetting play into your thinking?

## 9. The Road to Forgiveness

At once he [Judas] came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Luke 28:50

**Read: Matthew 26:6-9, John 12:1-6**

Judas is remembered as the betrayer. Did the disciples ever forgive Judas? In today's passages of scripture, I want to explore the ways the disciples grappled with their memories of Judas in the years after Jesus left them.

Have you ever travelled with someone? By the end of the experience, you either really like the person you travelled with, or you can't stand them. Travelling together is an intense experience. The disciples knew each other really well because they had travelled together for three years. They all received the same training. At the last supper, there was shock when Jesus says, "One of you will betray me."

How did the disciples come to terms with the betrayal of Judas? We never hear anyone talking about forgiving Judas for what he did. But the way Judas's story gets told in the different gospels provides some insight into how they were processing this betrayal.

In John's gospel, Judas is mentioned five times, and every single time his name is mentioned, the writer reminds the reader that Judas is the one who betrayed Jesus. This gospel writer tells us that Satan entered into Judas. And we are told that when the woman pours the ointment on Jesus's feet, it is Judas who says that this could have been sold for three hundred denarii. John's gospel names Judas as a thief, who only wanted the money for himself.

In Matthew's gospel, we hear the same story of the ointment, but Matthew doesn't single out Judas in this story. Matthew remembers that all the disciples said that it was wasteful to use the ointment that way because it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Matthew does not name Judas as a thief. Perhaps Matthew as a former tax-collector has some understanding of Judas's love of money, and decides to not name that.

Matthew also adds a few important details to the story of Judas. Matthew remembers that in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus calls Judas, "Friend." Matthew also tells us that before Judas died, he repented of betraying Jesus and gave back the twenty pieces of silver. John's gospel does not include that story although he must have known it.

What's happening here? Matthew and John were both impacted equally by the betrayal of Judas, but Matthew paints a much more sympathetic picture. He doesn't forget that Judas betrayed Jesus, but he also doesn't want to make him out to be worse than he was. He tries to set the betrayal in a broader context.

Neither gospel talks about anyone forgiving Judas for his betrayal, but I have to think that Matthew was taking some steps along that road.

### **The bigger picture**

Sharon Olds is a poet who has written about family struggles and pain. In one memorable poem called ["Late Poem to my Father"](#) she deals with his alcoholism and failings in her life. In the poem she journeys back in her imagination to her father's childhood, to her father as a seven year old boy who was being hurt by his own father. She talks about something "not given" to him, or something "taken" that affected him so badly that forty years later he needed to drink himself unconscious every night to escape it.

By the end of the poem, Olds is able to send a message of love to that little boy whose "tiny bones inside his soul were twisted in greenstick fractures." She sends love to that little boy, "as if it could reach him in time."

I read this poem thirty years ago, and kept it. It resonates with me as I think about my own difficult relationship with my stepmother. I could focus entirely on what my stepmother did and didn't do, and how that affected me. I had that pain on a loop in my head for so many years: a loop of hurt and resentment.

The thing that helped unspool that loop was for me to go backwards, like the poet, to reach an earlier version of my stepmother. What made her the way she was? What family did she come from and how might things have been different? I went for counselling, and I still remember the counsellor asking me the revolutionary question, "What was it like for a forty year old woman to suddenly have three stepdaughters between the ages of 8 and 12?" It may seem like a simple straightforward question, but I had never asked it before.

My stepmother died a number of years ago. I have been puzzling about her life, and every so often another piece falls into place. Her final five years were her happiest, I think. She lived in a nursing home, and with the help of a geriatric psychiatrist, she finally got the medication she needed. She had a personality change, where she was not so self-centred, paranoid and angry. I think about how little information about mental illness was available to her earlier on. How might her whole life have been different if she had access to the mental health medication she needed?

I found the road to forgiveness with my stepmother by unpacking her life and trying to see where it went wrong, where our relationship went wrong. For the poet Sharon Olds, it went wrong before she was even born, her father warped and broken as a very young child.

I didn't get any apologies from my stepmother for anything she ever did. Thinking about the bigger picture of her life helped me to come to terms with the pain I carried. It never excused that harm, but it helped me walk a few steps on the road to forgiveness.

## **A delicate balance**

There is nothing worse than having someone lecture you about how the person who hurt you was also a hurting person. I have a friend who was lectured like this about the dad who abused her. She responded by saying, "That makes it worse. He knew how much it hurt to be abused and he decided to do the exact same thing to me!"

Too often, the church has lectured the hurting person, telling them that they should love the abuser, even while the abuse is happening. Pastors preach about Jesus not forgiving us till we forgive others. These sorts of messages are unrealistic and dangerous: this is theology used as a hammer on a hurting person.

Once a place of safety is reached, and time has passed, we may be ready to look at the bigger picture and consider forgiveness. Trying to understand what would lead a person to make such bad choices is a way of taking the first tiny steps on a road to forgiveness. Like a parent whose infant is learning to walk, God is there with arms stretched out to catch us as we try to find the delicate balance we need for those first faltering steps.

## **Wonderings**

Have you ever had someone try to lecture you on forgiving someone while you were still being hurt? How did that feel?

Think of someone who has hurt you. Have you stopped to consider what motivations they might have had, or how earlier experiences shaped their choices?

What prevents you from thinking about the person who harmed you that way?

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## 10. Steps Along the Way

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.' Matthew 18:21-22.

### **Read: Matthew 18:1-22**

Matthew 18 contains the famous teaching on forgiveness where Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church. He wonders whether seven times is enough. Jesus says to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22) What is the context for this hard teaching?

There are some more very strong words at the end of the chapter, which say that we will not receive God's forgiveness unless we forgive others. These are also famous words. I think we have read these verses more frequently than the strong statements found at the beginning of Matthew 18, which is why we are focussing on these earlier verses today.

I think any calls for forgiveness, particularly for forgiveness for people in power, need to be balanced with these words at the beginning of the chapter. Jesus shows care for children and "little ones" and has his harshest words for people who hurt them or even put a "stumbling block" in their way. The statement "it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" are arguably the most severe words that Jesus ever speaks.

Too often churches have been willing to forgive powerful people for the harm they have done, which only allows them to continue hurting more people. Challenging power, and taking it away from people is harsh, which is perhaps why Jesus uses the dramatic images of cutting off your hand or foot. The emphasis in the early part of Matthew 18 is on the hurt person; the shepherd will leave the many and search out the one who has been harmed.

### **Discernment**

In some ways, the call to forgive unceasingly is a good mantra for community life. We hurt each other in many small ways when we work and live together. Nurturing resentment and anger is never going to provide a way forward, and forgiving others is a key to community life.

However, when people with power use that power to hurt others, they need to be challenged. Jesus never says, "We need to forgive the Pharisees seventy times seven." Instead, he calls them to account for the power they have and the way they are hurting others.

When a parent uses their power to sexually abuse the children in their care, we should not be talking about forgiving seventy-seven times. Instead, the strong imagery of cutting off the hand

or foot and casting them away is more appropriate. Children need to be safe, the person who hurt them needs to get serious help for their problems.

The same is true for marriage. In marriage we hurt our partners in many small ways, over and over again, and we need to forgive each other, seventy-seven times. But when a partner is unfaithful and breaks their marriage vows, forgiveness may just be enabling them to go on to violate the vows again. And when one partner is hitting the other, this is a crime. Forgiving that crime is only going to perpetuate a cycle of abuse, and allow it to happen again. People need to be held to account for the harm they've done, so they can get help. Why are they seeking out other sexual partners? Why are they using violence to hurt the people they are supposed to cherish?

In the church, discernment is central as we decide when to forgive and when to say, "Enough is enough."

### **The Road to Forgiveness**

If someone has seriously harmed you, forgiveness might not be so much an event, where you forgive and it's done, as a road that you walk.

I think of a friend who I'll call Anne, whose partner was unfaithful with numerous women. What does forgiveness look like for her? It did not mean she stayed in the marriage to continue to be betrayed over and over again. She found a place of safety by leaving the marriage. As months and years pass, she may want to forgive her ex-husband, but in many ways the harm he did to her continues. She no longer has a partner. She shares custody of her children with him, which means that half the time, she can't see her children. Their dad has a new live-in partner, so there is an adult in the kid's lives who she did not choose. He contested the divorce, and lawyers got most of their money, so she has to live in a small townhouse, compared to the nice house they used to live in. His child support cheques are irregular, and she can't rely on them, and she has no energy to take him to court. And worst of all, his betrayal means that it is difficult for her to trust anyone. Her ability to trust has been corroded.

Anne may want to move on; forgiving her ex-husband is something she would like to do. As she lives with the consequences of his betrayal every day, she wakes up and makes the decision to walk the road to forgiveness. Instead of thinking of him with hatred, she decides to just him go. It's a decision she doesn't just make once, but seventy-seven times. Seventy times seventy times seven. Every day of her life. She decides again and again to walk that forgiveness road because every day she has to live with the hard consequences of his betrayal.

Our churches are filled with people on these forgiveness journeys; some we know about, and some are hidden. Divorce is public, but sexual abuse is often kept more private. There are many hurts we carry in our knapsacks on the road, and we want to lay those burdens down. We don't want to be chained to the people who hurt us forever.

Knowing this, how can our communities be places where we nurture and sustain each other on these long forgiveness journeys? Encouraging love for one another is important. Good teaching also helps, where we talk about forgiveness as a long-term project that's accomplished by many small decisions.

### **Wonderings**

How do you feel when you hear Jesus talking about great millstones around someone's neck?

Have you or someone you loved had a long-term forgiveness project?

Does the image of a journey, and "seventy-times-seven" steps on that journey help you?

What could you do to help someone on their forgiveness journey?

What would be unhelpful for them?

## 11. Father Forgive Them

Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' Luke 23:34

**Read: Luke 23:18-34**

Religious leaders were very uncomfortable with the way Jesus spoke about forgiveness. He offered forgiveness to a man who was paralyzed (Luke 5:17-26), and the religious leaders grumble. They thought that only God should be allowed to do this. Jesus offers forgiveness to a number of people, including Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). In that story Jesus does not talk explicitly about forgiveness, but he says, "Today salvation has come to this house."

Because Jesus publicly established his ability to forgive people as the "Son of Man," this passage today is particularly noteworthy. What was the meaning of Jesus's statement, "Father forgive them..."?

People have puzzled over these words for millennia. There are many interpretations. Who is the "them" Jesus is talking about it? Is it the guards who crucified him, or Pilate or Herod, or the Jewish authorities, or the crowds who shouted "Crucify him," or was he perhaps talking about humankind who rejected him? Or maybe he was referring to Judas, and Peter, who betrayed him? It is not entirely clear, perhaps it could mean all those people.

Jesus could have just said, "Father, I forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He had forgiven the sins of other people, as we've just seen. Instead, he asks God to forgive them. What is going on here? Perhaps Jesus was interceding, asking God not to remember the sin, because God would be angry seeing Jesus crucified. Perhaps the assumption is that Jesus has already forgiven them, but now he wants God to do that too.

Another interpretation is that Jesus is giving this work to God to do, because it was too much for him at the moment. Jesus was human, as well as divine. Maybe he gives that forgiveness work to God, because it is not humanly possible to forgive the very people who are torturing you when you are in pain and gasping for breath. There are many ways to think about what Jesus said.

Who forgives whom?

In today's study, we are going to concentrate on who accomplishes the task of forgiveness. In human life, some forgiveness seems impossible. In an earlier part of this study, I already mentioned the Holocaust as one such example. The harm done was so enormous, and the evil was perpetrated by so many on so many others, that forgiveness is too gargantuan for humans to accomplish in that situation. We can pray, "Father, forgive them." We may or may not want to add, "because they do not know what they are doing," since when you are putting people in gas chambers, it is pretty obvious that you are committing mass murder.



In our own lives, there can be hurts which we find impossible to forgive. I think of a man I'll call Robert. Robert had inherited a solid family business when his parents died. In good faith, he welcomed an old friend into partnership in the business, expanding into some new areas. Over the next few years, things did not go well, and with a downturn in the economy, calamity fell upon them. Creditors wanted their money. As bankruptcy was declared, it became apparent his so-called "friend" had enriched himself from the company, protecting his assets, while Robert had been making sacrifices and giving 150%. His "friend" walked away from bankruptcy relatively unscathed, while Robert lost not only the business, but also his family home.

The betrayal Robert felt was the biggest in his life, and the bitterest part was that his family was suffering from it. They not only had to move, but they could no longer afford to live in their home community, and the children had to leave their friends and switch schools. Robert had hoped to welcome his children into the family business one day as he had been welcomed. Now he had nothing. All he had was an abiding and deep hatred for his former friend who betrayed him.

As months and years went by, Robert eventually realized that he had to put down the hatred he was carrying because it was toxic. It was dominating his life. He had no desire to talk to his friend, who had never expressed any remorse whatsoever. At first Robert had fantasized about revenge. He could picture himself confronting his former friend and hitting him. He imagined schemes where his former friend would lose all he owned. Then he imagined God exacting justice, maybe his former friend would have an accident or get sick. Over time the thoughts of revenge just exhausted him. He just wanted the pain and hurt to go away.

For Robert, forgiveness meant praying the prayer, "Father forgive him." Robert felt he did not have the resources to forgive a hurt that deep, but he knew that God could manage that. What Robert wanted most of all was to not have to think about his friend, and the pain he caused, every hour of every day.

### **Loosing the chains that bind us**

When great harm is done to us, it is like giant chains are forged which connect us to the person who hurt us. The person who harmed us may not feel them, and may not think twice about what they've done. But for the victim, the chains are strong.

Too often the church has placed unrealistic expectations on hurting people. Christians have sometimes expected you to love the person who hurt you, and wish them well, perhaps even welcoming them back into your circle. Forgiveness is often equated with reconciliation and restoration of relationship. When the church requires this type of forgiveness from those who are desperately hurt, whose very souls are wounded, it is not good news. It is like telling a person with two broken legs to go and climb a mountain.

In most cases of deep hurt, what is needed most is simply to cut the chains. You just don't want to be connected to the person who harmed you, you don't want the pain to be dominating your life.

Jesus can come alongside us in these situations. At the foot of the cross, we see Jesus himself giving a burden to God to carry, "You forgive them." Day by day, Jesus can help us break the links of the chains that bind us to the person who harmed us. We can pray, "You forgive them."

### **Wonderings**

1. Why do you think Jesus said, "Father, forgive them"?
2. Have you ever asked God to forgive someone because you couldn't?
3. Have you equated forgiveness with reconciliation at times? How might the image of cutting chains be helpful and more realistic?

## 12. A Gift from God

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17

### **Read: James 1:17-25**

Most of this Bible study has been written from the perspective of people who have been harmed. We have wrestled with the question, “How do we forgive people who have hurt us terribly?” In this final session I want to also consider the perspective of someone who has done great harm. They (we) also sometimes greatly desire forgiveness. Today’s scripture passage has something to say for all parties in situations where harm has been done.

Forgiveness, when it comes into our lives, is a perfect gift from God. For some people who have been hurt, forgiveness can arrive like a dove from a heaven, all at once on their shoulder, taking away hatred and animosity. However, often it is a gift that arrives in bits and pieces on different days, and we have to work very hard to unwrap it.

When I have hurt someone, I may desire the gift of forgiveness too. In some cases, it can arrive like a dove from heaven. The person we hurt forgives us freely, before we have apologized or even really understood what we’ve done. In that case, we need to still do the work of unpacking what that gift means. Apologies and accountability are still important.

However sometimes the person we hurt cannot forgive us, even though we desperately want them to do this. It is a hard reality to know that when you have hurt someone, you may never reconcile with them, and they may never be able to give you forgiveness. Forgiveness can still be possible from God. That’s where the verse we read from James comes in, “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21). Forgiveness from God is not a way to avoid the hard work of repentance and accountability, but it is something that can bring us peace when we do the work. Knowing that God has forgiven us is a consolation, even as we hope for a more complete healing in the future.

### **The role of community**

I was in a large meeting at a Mennonite conference where a man told his terrible story. He had been a soldier in a Latin American country. He had, as part of his duties, been responsible for torturing many people in a military prison. Years passed, and he emigrated and found faith. Now he was haunted by the faces of the people he had harmed. He was feeling tortured by what he had done. At the end of his sad story he appealed to his audience, “Can you forgive me for what I did?”

Immediately, a man stood up in the crowd and said, “Brother, we forgive you for what you did.”

I left the meeting feeling shaken and upset. I did feel sad and compassionate towards the person who had been a torturer. But he had not hurt me. I could not forgive him for the harm he had done. He needed to apologize to the people he hurt. He was addressing a group of white North American Mennonites, and likely none of us had ever experienced incarceration and torture. We knew almost nothing of what he had done, or what it meant to the people he harmed. It is easy to forgive people who have not harmed you.

There is a place for community to extend open and welcoming arms, knowing that someone has committed sins and is repentant. But this welcoming needs to be done carefully, and with great care for the people who were originally harmed. Consider the story of a pastor who had crossed sexual boundaries with a number of his congregants. The victims laid a complaint and he was found guilty of sexual misconduct. A few months later, the church publicly forgave the pastor for what he had done and welcomed him back into fellowship with them.

The problem was, the pastor had not yet taken full responsibility for what he had done. He had not apologized adequately to the victims. He had minimized and denied some of their charges, and blamed them for what happened. But outwardly, he was seeking forgiveness, and was eager to be welcomed back into the community. What did it mean for the victims to hear about this public act of forgiveness? How come the church had never reached out to them? Somehow, something felt wrong.

Sin breaks relationships between us and God, and between us and others. When we harm someone, we repent and seek forgiveness from God, but we also must do the work of repenting and offering accountability to the person we hurt. We hope that forgiveness will eventually be extended. We should never bypass the hurting person, just because it's easier and faster to get forgiveness from someone else.

### **In God's good time**

Human beings hate loose ends. We would like things to be tied up and settled. We want to tell the children to stop fighting, say sorry, and now go and play. In our congregational settings, it is difficult to sit with people who are desperately hurt. It takes a lot of energy to deal with their pain and anger. And then there is the pain of the person who has done the harm. It may take months or years for them to truly understand what they did. Or they may be repentant, and we may feel they understand the harm they did, but the person they hurt is not ready to forgive. What do we do with all this pain?

Viewing forgiveness as a gift that will come in God's good time can help. Forgiveness can grow in the harmed person like an unborn baby. When will it be born? Only God knows. We can nurture and support, providing nourishing food and comfort to the hurting person, but we cannot have that baby for them. They have to have the labour pains, and God will deliver them.

For the person who has hurt someone, of course they want this to happen sooner rather than later. But we have to live with the fact that forgiveness cannot be forced. Demanding that someone produce forgiveness is like asking a pregnant woman to give birth right now, regardless of whether she is ready to give birth. Just because we want to see the baby, doesn't mean it's time for the baby to be born.

God has time for us. God gave us time when we were created and we were given breath. God can give us grace to live with unfinished business and loose ends. We can pray and trust that in God's good time, forgiveness can come into our lives like a gift.

### **Wonderings**

Have you ever really wanted someone you hurt to forgive you, but they couldn't? How did that feel for you?

Have you ever seen someone bypass the person they hurt, and try to get forgiveness from someone else? How did that work out?

How might it help us to view forgiveness as a gift that God is birthing in our lives?

Looking back over this bible study, have your understandings of forgiveness changed in any way?

### **Closing Prayer:**

God of great gifts,  
thank you that you are the God who hears.  
You hear us when we cry about hurts that are too big to put into words,  
the hurts that haunt us in the middle of the night.  
Thank you for loving us, and comforting us,  
and telling us we are worthy of love, even when we feel unlovable.  
Thank you for giving us the Bible,  
and a community in which to read it.  
Help us on our forgiveness journeys.  
Help those who have done the hurting to repent,  
and to show accountability for what they've done.  
Thank you for ushering us to places of safety,  
and for sometimes bringing good where harm was done.  
Thank you for giving us permission to sometimes just walk away,  
and for helping us break the chains that bind us to our enemies.  
Help us make good decisions in community about forgiveness,  
being welcoming, but also wary.  
Teach us to be careful how we speak about forgiveness,  
so that we nurture rather than harm those who are suffering.  
We feel Jesus's presence at our side on our forgiveness journeys,  
giving us strength on each of seventy times seven days.

We trust that you will, in your good time,  
deliver forgiveness into our lives,  
a gift that sets us free.  
We pray all this in the name of Jesus,  
who forgives us freely, Amen.