

# Sermon for Sunday, September 17, 2017 - "Forgiveness Is Releasing"

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 17, 2017  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

*A note before we begin - This is a difficult passage and forgiveness is a difficult topic that raises many questions, hurts and memories. Today there is a message of both challenge and comfort from this passage, but you may not be in a place where you can hear either. That's OK. God is present and working healing for you in many ways - today and throughout your life. Pr. Marion and I are also available for pastoral care.*

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Peter comes to Jesus and asks a question many of us wonder, "How often should I forgive?" Peter tries to be generous, wondering if he should forgive "as many as seven times?" Not just seven times, Jesus says, but seventy-seven times, or in some accounts as often as seventy times seven. In scripture seven represents completeness. The goal Jesus sets is complete, unlimited forgiveness.

What does this mean for us? Does this mean if someone hurts us we are supposed to let them hurt us again and again? Are we supposed to be a doormat - trampled upon over and over? Is Jesus saying we must keep on working at relationships that are painful or even toxic? Do we keep letting people do us harm and keep on taking it?

Those are all common misinterpretations of what it means to forgive. We often get the impression that forgiveness means we need to do all we can to make everything OK with people who hurt us - that we need to just hang on and keep on trying to be nice.

Yet, this story Jesus tells to illustrate forgiveness is all about releasing - releasing rather than holding those who owe debts. The Greek word translated in this passage as forgive, *aphiemi* (ay fee me), also means to release, to let go. And, the original Aramaic word Jesus would have used when talking about forgiveness also means to loosen or untie.

Forgiveness is about release. Forgiveness is not about holding on to painful relationships. It is not about hanging on to the status quo, hoping someone will change or stop causing us hurt. It is about release, letting go.

We are called to release people from debts they cannot repay - from obligations of money, time, favors and other things we feel are owed to us. We are called to let go of the pain and hurt others cause us, rather than holding it against them. We are called to let go of the hope that the past can be changed.

This takes a lot of practice. It is often something we need to do seventy-seven or more times to feel that we have released the debt, let go of the hurt. All of this is only possible because God has first forgiven us, because God gives us the grace and strength we need to release the debts, to release the hurt.

When we think of forgiveness as release, we can see that sometimes forgiveness means letting go of toxic relationships - ending them, getting out of them, separating from them. The Greek word *aphiemi* (ay fee me), translated here as forgive, can also mean to send away or to divorce. Sometimes forgiveness can only happen after we separate from a relationship that is harming us. This is what is needed for victims of abuse and violence. Protection, separation, and safety are required before letting go of the hurt is even an option. When we are still at risk of harm, we shouldn't try to release the hurt because the pain can push us to seek needed help and safety.

Sometimes, the releasing involved in forgiveness means letting go of trying to change and fix others and instead, releasing them, entrusting them to God. Rather than continuing to hope we can save someone by engaging them, we are called to release them into the hands of the One who truly can save.

And sometimes, the release of forgiveness involves letting go of hurt so that reconciliation is more of a possibility. Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. We can practice forgiveness even if a person has not repented or apologized, even if they don't know they've hurt us, even if they have died. Reconciliation is a different matter. Reconciliation requires repentance, remorse and the active participation of all parties in the relationship. We can choose to forgive; we can't choose to reconcile with someone if they are unwilling. Yet, when we choose to forgive and release the hurt, sometimes that can open up space for reconciliation to be a possibility. And sometimes, when we let go of hoping the past can be changed, then too, there is more space for reconciliation.

The releasing and letting go of forgiveness is liberating for us. As Jesus' parable vividly illustrates: When we refuse to release others, we end up imprisoned by anger and hurt. Offering forgiveness means that we refuse to allow another's sin to control us, to hold us, to bind us. Offering forgiveness sets us free.

Still, we often feel compelled to withhold forgiveness because that seems to offer us some control, especially when the hurt has come from someone who has more power than we do. Refusing to forgive can feel like the only way we can have any power. Yet, as in the parable, our lack of forgiveness can eventually become a prison that not only holds the other person but our own selves.

We are bound by our own sins, by the sins of others and by our refusal to forgive; but that is not the end of our story. Jesus, who articulated our dilemma in this vivid parable, went on to let go of his very life for the healing of the world. When he was on the cross, he released his spirit and again we see that word *aphiemi* (ay fee me), the same word used in this parable to mean release and forgive. On the cross, Jesus released his spirit of forgiveness and love. That Spirit gives us the grace and strength to forgive. That Spirit opens a new future for us, a future in which we share in the Spirit's work of reconciling all of creation to God.

That Spirit shows us that God has chosen to completely, endlessly forgive.

Thanks be to God.