

# Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2020 - "Forgiveness in This Apocalyptic Time"

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

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

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

There is so much to say about forgiveness - so much more than can be said in one sermon. Today I want to lift up that forgiveness is a starting point, not an end point. Forgiveness isn't a destination, a place we arrive in which finally everything is coming up roses and we can live happily ever after. How I wish it were that way.

I remember a time when I became aware that I needed to forgive someone. I was so angry. Anger was clouding my judgement. I needed to let it go and release it. I needed to forgive. This person, someone who'd harmed me often starting in my childhood, hadn't apologized and wasn't showing any sign of remorse. But I was tired of being angry. At the time, I was also desperately searching for something of great sentimental value - something that was missing, in large part, because of the actions of this person. My anger was getting in the way of a thoughtful search. I needed to let go. I prayed, "God, help me forgive." I said, "I forgive you" inside my head. Right after that I felt better. I felt release and relief. My thinking was clearer. I was even able to find what I'd been searching for. Finally, I had some resolution - until I saw this person again, until I told the whole story to someone else again. And the anger was still there. Forgiveness is not an end point. It is the starting point.

I need to keep on forgiving this person over and over again. I need to keep on letting the hurt and anger go. I need to do this not for her sake, but for my own well-being. Beginning with forgiveness, again and again, has brought healing to me and to the relationship. But that isn't always possible. Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation.

Reconciliation requires both parties to work at the relationship and sometimes that can't happen. Maybe the other person won't acknowledge the pain they've caused. Maybe they are long dead. Reconciliation isn't always possible. Yet we can still forgive.

Forgiveness releases us from being imprisoned and tortured by anger, bitterness and hatred. Forgiveness means letting go of the hope that the past can be changed. It means leaning forward into a future that isn't dictated by what has happened before - it is a starting point. Yet the forces that would keep us bound to the past are so strong that we need to begin with forgiveness over and over, again and again.

I think that's what Jesus is talking about when he says we are to forgive seventy-seven times. Peter suggests forgiving seven times and, as teacher Audrey West points out, that's a number we can measure and count: seven days of the week, seven seas, seven colors of the rainbow. Maybe we could just take a forgiveness pill once a day for seven days and then be good to go. Seven does

represent perfection in the Bible, but it's also a measurable number. Jesus' response to Peter, and his extreme parable, takes forgiveness out of the "countable" category and places it into the realm of the incalculable.<sup>1</sup> We are called to forgive over and over, more times than we can count. We are never really done with forgiving. We are always beginning again. Forgiveness is a starting point, not an end point.

Thinking about it as a starting point also helps me to envision how forgiveness connects with working for justice, especially racial justice. Black victims of racial hatred are so often pressured to forgive very quickly. And when they do choose to forgive, it's often seen as the end of the story as in: *Well, they forgave the killer, so everything is fine; we can put that unpleasantness behind us.* That's how some interpreted the actions of Brandt Jean, brother of Botham Jean.

Brandt told a Dallas police officer that he forgave her after she was found guilty of murdering Botham in his apartment. Some used his words to imply: *Well he could forgive so you should move past this and stop advocating for racial justice.* Yet, forgiveness did not mean the end of Brandt's advocacy. A few months after the trial he spoke to the Institute for Law Enforcement Administration after the institute presented him with an Ethical Courage Award. He used his speech as an opportunity to tell the officers that they could and should do better.

"I implore you to champion policies and procedures that amplify the value of all lives", Brandt said. "I insist that you encourage diverse leadership that can model inclusion and restraint. Most importantly, I ask that you remember my brother," he continued. "And when you remember him, I want you to ask yourself what are you doing to ensure there will be no other families like mine — no other little brothers that have to model ethical leadership in forgiveness of a cop whose lack of training and discipline caused them to carelessly take the life of another."<sup>2</sup>

Author and woman of color Debie Thomas puts it this way, "When ... victims of racial hatred forgive their racist oppressors, they're not ending anything; they're preparing their hearts to begin. To resist. To approach the battlefield one more wearisome time. Forgiveness enables the oppressed not only to survive, but to lay down the cumbersome weight of hatred and bitterness, and gear up for the fight. Forgiveness is the *beginning* of the hard work of building God's kingdom — not the end."<sup>3</sup>

Forgiveness is where healing and justice and the coming of God's kingdom on earth begin. Forgiveness is where we begin. And, all the forgiveness we can offer really begins with the immeasurable, boundless mercy and compassion of God. The incalculable forgiveness Jesus points us toward is beyond our own strength, beyond our capacity. It is not something we can do on our own. It is only because we have been forgiven that we can begin again and again by forgiving, by letting go, by leaning into a future not defined by the past.

Each new day we can begin again remembering that we are God's beloved children who have been forgiven and set free through Christ Jesus. This assurance is what allows us to begin every day in this broken world with a commitment to forgive, to love, to show mercy and compassion. And oh, does the world need this right now. We are living in such difficult times, in times when there is so much that has gone so wrong in the recent past and in ages past that is making things so hard today. We are living in an apocalypse, a word which is often understood to refer to end times but

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4570](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4570)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/courts/2019/12/03/i-am-not-a-threat-botham-jeans-brother-says-as-he-accepts-award-from-police-training-group/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2748-unpacking-forgiveness>

really means revealing and exposing. We are living in a time when past wrongs are being exposed and laid bare, when our collective sins of racism, greed, and disregard for the earth are being revealed.

These past wrongs will not be healed through hatred, anger and bitterness.

We will not be healed by retribution and violence.

We will be healed by mercy and compassion.

We will be healed by a willingness to work for restorative justice and a future not defined by past sins.

We will be healed by forgiveness that sets us free for the work of building God's kingdom.

Today, may we begin again. Today, may you know that you are God's beloved children, you are forgiven, you are set free. You can begin again in working for the building of God's kingdom.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.