

"A Mighty Big Word,"

20 March 2005 (*communion*)

Bible passage: **Matthew 18:21-22** (*The Message*)

Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts one? Seven?" Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven."

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Living a Life That Matters*, tells about an encounter he had with a divorced woman who was still angry with her husband for having left her ten years earlier. He said that he remembers saying to her, "Look at what you've been doing all these years. You've been standing here in Massachusetts holding a hot coal in your hand, waiting for your ex-husband to walk by so you can throw it at him. Meanwhile, he has been living happily in New Jersey with his new family, and you've burned your hand waiting."

Not all of us are holding onto anger against an ex-spouse, but I would guess that many of us are harboring a grudge or holding some resentment toward someone for something. We're irked that someone at work got the promotion we deserved; we're plagued by thoughts of a bad childhood; we are irritated that a friend betrayed a confidence we had shared. There always seems to be some reason that we have for our hearts to be hardened against one person or another for one thing or another.

Forgiveness. That seems to be the answer to our dilemma, but that's a mighty big word that hard enough to say, let alone live out. What do we mean when we actually forgive someone? What are the implications of forgiving?

Our faith teaches us that forgiveness is the right path to choose. The Lord's Prayer says, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" It's a given that we're to forgive others. Jesus, from the cross, asked God to forgive those who were responsible for his suffering and death.

In the Bible passage we have for this morning, Peter, one of the twelve disciples, thought he was being pretty magnanimous when he asked Jesus, "How many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Now he had some grounds for phrasing his question that way. In the Jewish tradition of the time, the teaching

was that one should forgive a brother or sister three times. Seven times seemed quite generous to Peter. And yet, Jesus stunned him when he told him to forgive seventy times seven! The number wasn't to be taken as the literal number 70, but it meant to forgive an infinite number of times. In other words, there was no limit to the number of times we forgive those who wrong us,

Jesus was so adamant in his response because he understood that forgiving those who harm us is really more for us than for the other person. He understood the essence of human nature, and wanted that which was best for our lives.

Therapist Beverly Flanigan, a clinical professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, says, "Forgiveness is a powerful tool." She continued, "Whether you've been abused by a parent, dumped by a spouse, abandoned by a child, or betrayed by a friend, forgiveness is a process that allows you to reframe even the most hurtful injury, reframe how you regard the person who hurt you, ditch the anger and hatred that seals you in a miasma of negative energy, and move on with your life."

Forgiveness is a big word, and really forgiving others is an even bigger act. The dictionary defines the verb "to forgive" as this: "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish." I usually like to think of it as our being willing to let go of hard feelings and hurt and to replace those feelings with good will toward the one who harmed us.

Author and speaker Paula D'Arcy knows how hard it is to forgive. Her daughter and husband were killed when their car was struck by a drunk driver, and she's had a lot of forgiving to do. One of the things that she cautions us about is that forgiveness does not mean condoning someone's actions, but it means loving until we are able to separate a person from that person's actions. She says, "Forgiveness is really a choice, not a feeling. It's a matter of will."

(Monk clip)

That's a tough thing to do, and I doubt seriously that we can even begin to forgive others without God's help. Praying constantly to be able to forgive is certainly a start. Literally practicing letting go by opening our fists and

turning our hands openly toward God may be something that helps. To be able to forgive isn't something that happens quickly in some instances. It takes some time for the pain to ease, and for us to arrive in a more centered place where we can more clearly see the vulnerability of the other person.

Carol Roth, a 58-year-old poet and writer from New Jersey understands how hard true forgiveness really is. In an article I read, she talked about her mother, and how her mother badly mistreated her and her siblings in their younger years. While no one was really certain of the woman's official diagnosis, Carol's life experience was that her mother was horrific at too many times in her life. Carol said that her mom could awaken you at two o'clock in the morning, and rip into your legs with coat hangers for no apparent reason. She could still recall vividly the intense pain and the wounds on her legs.

Carol's refuge was school, where she loved to learn and loved to write. In fact, because of her writing, she was offered the opportunity to attend a four-year college for a degree in journalism, and her tuition would be completely paid for. All she had to do was stay in school and graduate. However, on her 16th birthday, she mother dragged her out of bed, slapped her in the face, and said that today was the day she had to quit school and take charge of her three younger siblings full-time.

Devastated, Carol did what her mother told her to do, and spent the next year taking care of her brothers and sisters and working part-time. Then, just after her 17th birthday, her mother threw her out of the house. She came home from work one day to find her clothes strewn all over the street, and to hear her mother screaming from the window that, now that her baby sister was older, she didn't need Carol anymore. She should just hit the road.

And hit the road she did. She moved into a boardinghouse and worked at retail jobs, all the while sending money to support her father who had left the family some time before, and her mother for her brothers and sisters still at home. Eventually she earned her GED, took some college courses, and went through two marriages before marrying someone she described as a wonderful man, with whom she has raised six children. Even in the midst of everything that happened, Carol always made time to do her mother's grocery shopping, hang her wash, or stop by her house to cook her something to eat.

Now here she was in a hospital room with her mother, who was dying. She had suffered a stroke that had robbed her of the ability to beg Carol's forgiveness, or say "I'm sorry" or "I love you." She had cancer that had

spread to her brain making all that impossible. Her mother reached toward her, and a few garbled sounds escaped from her lips. Carol knew that her faith background had taught her to fear what lay ahead, so Carol was sure that she was terrified. Now, after all that was between them, what was she to do?

Carol Roth said, that as her mother reached toward her, she prayed, "Oh God, tell me what to do." Two words came to her mind—"Comfort her." Then two more,—"Love her." And then, "Love her as you wanted to be loved as a child." Tears began to stream down Carol's face, and she moved slowly toward her mother's bed. She knew that she couldn't leave her, and she did what she had done with her own daughter when she awakened from a bad dream—she got into the bed.

She gathered her mother into her arms as gently as she could, and began telling her not to be afraid, that she would stay with her. Carol knew that her mother was nearing the end of her struggle, and she prayed still for what to do. Again, words came to her, the words—"Forgive her. And then tell her about me." Carol said that she was filled with a sense of peace, and she wrote, "This was something I needed to do, not only for her, but for myself. The monster had ceased to exist. In my arms was only a woman in pain and fear. I told her that I forgive her completely. Then I told her about God, my God, a God of unconditional love, of everlasting love."

When Carol paused and looked into her mother's face, she could see that the fear had left her, and then she smiled a beautiful smile. And then with a sigh as gentle as that of a contented child, she died. And Carol knew that she had truly forgiven her mother.

Forgiveness is a mighty big word, but one which we all need to offer to those who harm us. God's love empowers us to be able to forgive, and that's the gift that's offered to us today and every day. One of the ways we experience and give forgiveness is through the act of sharing in communion, and that's what we're going to do this morning.

As I've said many times before, I believe that we have communion here at The Garden every week, because we're all gathered at the table, and we have food to eat and share with one another. We've chosen to use the usual bread and juice of communion this morning to remind us that God's loving spirit and gift of forgiveness are contained in moments like these.

Everyone is invited to participate. It doesn't matter where we've been or what we've done, how good or how bad we think we are, everyone is welcome. Having said that, however, I know there are some here this morning,

who for whatever reason, would prefer not to participate in the act of communion. If that's where you are, I invite you to share with us in the spirit of communion, which is offering forgiveness to those who've wronged us, and accepting God's forgiveness and love into our own hearts.

Let me explain how this will happen. In just a moment, I'll invite the servers to come forward, and they will bring the bread and juice to your table. When all the tables have been served, we will eat together at the same time.

The reason we take communion is that it commemorates the story we are told about the last supper that Jesus had with his friends. After the meal was finished, he took bread, which was part of every meal, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and gave it to his friends, saying "Take, eat. And when you do, remember what we shared together."

Likewise, he took the cup, offered thanks to God, gave it to his disciples and said, "Every time you drink from the cup, remember the time we spent together, the life we shared. Remember me."

As the servers come around to your tables, I would invite us to have a private conversation with God, maybe beginning with the words, "God, I want to forgive.....for..... Will you help me do that?"

I'd like to invite the servers to come forward now.

Communion: As you eat this, forgive one another, and experience God's love and forgiveness for you. Amen.

Let us pray....

CLOSING:

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. The one who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love." And so it is.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

