

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 6, 2026 – The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 18:15-20 - Forgiveness
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In this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives instructions for how to deal with the problem of one member of the religious community offending another member. This lesson invites us to explore the complex topic of forgiveness. Remember that what Jesus has to say about forgiveness is "Gospel." What I have to say is not. I'm sharing with you some of what I have learned through reading and study and what I have come to understand after struggling for many years with what it means, as a follower of Jesus, to forgive others. I hope that you might find something I have to say helpful as you deal with forgiveness in your own unique life.

We pray the Lord's Prayer frequently, saying these words to God: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What does this mean? It sounds like the message from God is this: if you don't forgive those who do you wrong, I the Lord will not forgive your wrongdoing. Looked at this way, a lot rides on our forgiving others! That has troubled me greatly over the years. But is that the way we should understand this prayer that Jesus taught his followers? What does it mean for us to forgive other people?

We need to begin with bringing to mind what we believe to be true and what we trust to be true about who God is, what God is like. We profess to have faith in God who is love and who is merciful. We trust that love and mercy are attributes of God's unchangeable Being. That is where we begin.

What does Scripture teach us about the "conditions" under which our loving and merciful God forgives the wrongdoings of human beings? First, God does not have an attitude of "anything goes." Scripture does not teach us that what we do doesn't matter to God. On the contrary, what we do matters very much. God wants us to be righteous, which means being in right relationship with God, our will aligned with God's will. God is loving and merciful, and God is just. Justice involves sorting out righteous from unrighteous behavior. We believe that God will judge human beings justly, rightly.

As I understand God's forgiveness, the conditions for it are these: humble acknowledgement to God of our wrongdoing and repentance. In the Ash Wednesday service, the bishop or priest says these words of absolution after we acknowledge a long litany of human failings: "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live." This is the way we will find life and joy with God – by confession and repentance.

The first step is to acknowledge doing what we ought not to have done – "sins of commission" – and not doing what we ought to have done – "sins of omission." That's the first step. The second step is to turn away from these failings and turn toward living in a new way, in God's way of love. Then we trust that we can rejoice in being welcomed home by our loving and merciful Father, as the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us.

Now to human beings forgiving one another. Scripture teaches us that we are to be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful. God is willing to forgive us for so many faults and following from that, we believe that we are meant to be willing to forgive others for their faults that impact us.

Think of Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant or Debtor (Matthew 18:21-35). A king wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. One slave owed a huge amount, much more than he could repay in his entire lifetime. The king ordered the slave, his family, and his possessions to be sold to pay the debt, but the slave pleaded with the king to have patience with him. The king had pity for the slave and forgave him the debt. Then this slave met a fellow slave who owed him a small amount. He demanded his money, and when that slave asked for patience, the one whose huge debt had been forgiven by the king refused to forgive his fellow slave his small debt. When the king heard about this, he was furious and handed the unforgiving slave over to be tortured until he would repay his entire debt. The lesson for us – God has forgiven us for much, so we ought to be willing to forgive others.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is speaking about how members of the church community should handle occasions when one member "sins against" another member. His directions are clear. Though there is the possibility of reconciliation between the two members, if the offending member is ultimately unwilling to listen to the other, then the offender is to be expelled from the community. There are "conditions" for forgiveness and reconciliation between people. Our "requirement" is to be willing to forgive others. But true forgiveness is not possible if the other person fails to acknowledge their wrongdoing. And it is impossible if the other person continues in the wrong behavior. Estrangement between people may then be the only option.

There is a further requirement for people who have been harmed by another's wrongdoing. That is non-retaliation. Jesus clearly taught that we are not to take "an eye for an eye." We are not to take revenge. Forgiveness means giving up vengeance and retaliation, even though the harm done to us leaves us with feelings of anger, bitterness, sadness, or despair. Forgiveness is not easy. To do what I have described can take our whole heart's work, our whole soul's work.

In human interactions there is a broad range of possibilities regarding forgiveness when one person harms another. On one end of the continuum the two people may come together, honestly approach the problem, and reconcile after a process of admission of fault, repentance and reparation, and forgiveness. At the other end of the continuum, none of this takes place between the people, and estrangement with non-retaliation is the best possible outcome. There are also situations in which none of this is even possible. Think, for example, of a person seriously assaulted by a stranger who is never identified.

I think that sometimes the best we can do is leave the matter of the offender's behavior in God's hands. We may certainly judge the behavior to be wrong and harmful to us. We may certainly take that behavior and all our feelings and hurts to God in prayer. But judgment of the offender as a person is best left to God. What the offender did to us is part of their story with God. Our part is to find healing as best we can, asking for God's compassionate help.

God is, by definition, of Good Will. So is Jesus. Unfortunately, that is not always true of us. As we live our lives in a variety of relationships and encounters, we may be hurt – perhaps seriously hurt – by people of ill will. As followers of Jesus, we are meant to be willing to offer forgiveness to those who harm us. But we need to be clear about what that means as we apply Jesus' teaching to our lives because in the complexity of our lives, forgiveness may take many forms, depending on the situation. It can be difficult to know how we are called to forgive others. May the Holy Spirit guide us all as we seek to follow our Lord and "forgive those who trespass against us." Amen.