

Texts: Second Corinthians 2:1-10; Matt. 18:21-22 Forgiveness/Seventy Seven times

Theme: UNStuck

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost; Aug 23, 2020, Online; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A few months back, in the great quarantine of 2020, we were spending time with Ivy's mother, who lives here in Las Vegas. Since she's been out of work, she's enjoyed having our kids over to play and relax. She had purchased an outdoor playground, with swings, and a slide earlier in the year, and it sat in a box, unassembled. I knew what I had to do. So, I got my tools, and spent one late afternoon and into the evening putting together the swing set. It seemed simple enough, but as often happens, a few of the parts were missing, and we had to make a special order of a few pieces. Play time would have to wait. After another couple of weeks the parts arrived, and I was able to finish the project. We got it put together and the kids got to try it out. The weather was getting hotter, and they had their tablets and video games of course. They played for about 20 minutes.

As the months have dragged on, the smaller ones have been able to have fun on the playground in short bursts, running the garden hose down the slide to turn it into a water park, climbing to the top of the playground, fighting over the swings. But I wonder if it really gets used as much as it should.

Forgiveness is like that.

When we have been offended or betrayed, insulted, or injured, we can get stuck in feelings of anger, or hold a grudge that wears away at us, or remain longing for vengeance that will not satisfy. We get stuck because that pain that turns to bitterness only hurts us. It does no good.

Paul wrote to the beloved community of faith in Corinth to call on them to forgive someone - for something. We're not quite sure what happened there. One scholar notes that there was a leader of the opposition, who insulted Paul personally, who had been brought to discipline by the people of God in the Corinthian church. Maybe there were others who wanted a harsher punishment. Paul had written a letter to admonish them, and now writes that they should forgive the one who caused this offense.

What is a Christian who does not forgive?

Giving and receiving forgiveness is central to what it means to follow Jesus in our lives. This is what Jesus does for us; this is the true power that we have through the Holy Spirit to live and forgive and move forward in life as the body of Christ. How can we love if we cannot forgive? How can we be faithful if we have something against one of our siblings? How can we experience and demonstrate the grace that we have received through the cross if we do not forgive those who have hurt us?

Forgiveness is the power of Christ in us. This most precious gift sets us apart from the world - it is counter cultural. It is not easy, and we may struggle to forgive those who have inflicted particular trauma on us and those we love throughout our lives. But Forgiveness is the power to be UNStuck - to be freed from pain that traps us in cycles of fear, hate, and selfishness.

Paul urges the church to reaffirm their love of the one who had committed the offense. To do so would allow the church to move forward, to take the next faithful step, to stand in the Word that was given to them - the forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ. That's what forgiveness does for us.

Forgiveness frees us and *protects us from threats of those who would injure community*, cause division, or bring about pain. In Paul's case he called on the community to forgive the one who had caused offense, rather than seek a greater reprimand. For the sake of fellowship, and keeping the early church focused on the main thing - the gospel and the life under the cross. We know that God's grace and forgiveness for us is freely given - without hesitation. In this way Paul writes that the one who has caused the insult should also be extended grace, freely forgiven, for the community's sake, and for his own. I know that if I'm having an argument with my spouse, which does happen from time to time - that I have the ability to either escalate or deescalate the tension. I know how to push the buttons that make her more angry - I know what to do if I want to prolong the argument, just as I know (most of the time) what to say or do to bring about peace. Sometimes those who attempt to cause disruption are pushing our buttons and hope to drag out the battle. It may be difficult at times, but we can be the ones who in faith repent, ask for forgiveness ourselves, and forgive the ones who have hurt us.

Forgiveness frees us and *promotes healing and goodwill*. Every week we confess that we have fallen short of the glory of God. We speak out loud at least some of the ways we have turned away from neighbors, have done what we should not, and have not done what was needed. We do this together, with the understanding that each of us has our own personal failures that we'd rather not air out in the presence of everyone here (and the whole internet), but we recognize that each of us has broken bonds of relationship, lived out of our selfish nature, held onto grudges, and been less than gracious at times. As a church, we do retain the rite of individual confession and

forgiveness, and I and I'm sure pastor Matt have at times been able to listen when there is a need for more in depth and specific confession. When we share the sins that burden us either together or individually, and we hear God's Word of absolution, we can more readily be the community God has formed us to be here. When you hear that the entirety of your sins are forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ - you may be more able to share that word of grace, to walk with confidence, ready to serve gracefully, to welcome other in hospitality, and to work for justice in the world.

Forgiveness frees us and *opens a path to the future*. When we are stuck in our sins, and holding on to a grudge, we fail to see the good things around us. We may miss out on opportunities to heal others, to help make a difference, to be present and share in the laughter of our children, to care for aging adults, to feed a hungry neighbor. Our pain and anger consumes us. Without forgiveness, we can become obsessed with the one who has done us wrong, and stopped in our tracks. Every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray we would be forgiven as we forgive others. David Tiede, theologian and a former seminary president writes that, "Forgiveness is a way of life because it is the way of God's Kingdom."¹ In teaching his friends to pray, Jesus anticipated that there would be trials ahead, and many opportunities to forgive those who have sinned against us. Only as we are able to forgive can we move forward in faith, to love God, to live and serve the ones God loves, and to see the goodness of the Lord in our lifetime.

If it were easy, surely the Corinthian church would just have known what to do. They'd forgive the one who caused the trouble, and welcome him back into the community, they'd have a potluck and move on, all the better for the struggle. But we know it's not that easy. Paul provided the pastoral care they needed. The apostle called

¹ David Tiede, *Jesus and the Future*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 43

them back to the Word of God, and the gospel of grace that he had shared with them. He led by example and provided the opportunity to seek reconciliation, and even embraced those who had desired a different outcome. He lifted up joy, consolation, healing, and obedience, in the knowledge that these are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

And when we get worn down by the pain of the world, and the hurts inflicted upon us, and we want to give up, we can hear another word straight from Jesus to his buddy Rocky - that's Peter - who asked if seven was the magic number of times we ought to forgive our enemies. Many of the teachers of the time taught that 3 was enough - this comes from the prophet Amos. Peter offered up that they would forgive *seven times*, which might have seemed extravagant. *Seven times - and then, no more chances after that. Cancelled.* But Jesus corrects him, and says, "not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." This is absurdly more than Peter expected. In this word Jesus calls us to do the same. Just keep going. Jesus keep forgiving. Just keep loving each other. This is the Kingdom of which we are a part. It's not what the world does. It's not what we'd like, but it's who we are, givers of what we have received, grace upon grace, and more chances than we deserve.

Forgiveness is like that playground. Without all the parts and pieces, it's not a lot of fun. It took a lot of work to build. It's sitting out there in the backyard, waiting for the kids to come and use it. It's not meant to be constructed and left in the sun - it's meant for life, for joy, for being together. That's what God wants for us, to be UNStuck; to be faithful enough to forgive; to trust that God in Christ is with us, giving us what we need, drawing us into community, making us the body of Christ, through the living Word. To be UNStuck, forgiven and freed, ready for faithful service, always. Amen.