

THE MESSAGE for Feb 13, 2011**Matthew 18:21-35***Forgiveness***The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Tom and Linda argued all the way through their married life together. They couldn't agree on anything. Tom was oil; Linda was water. They argued and argued and argued. Somehow they reached their 50th wedding anniversary. And by God's grace, they actually managed to have children and raise a family. So on their 50th anniversary; their children gave them a counseling session with a marriage therapist as a golden wedding present.

True to form, Tom and Linda couldn't agree whether or not to accept the gift. They argued about when to go. They argued about how to get there. They were arguing as they walked in and sat down for their session. The therapist asked them one question and they started arguing. After a while, the therapist finally interrupted. "Stop!"

Then he said, "I'm going to do something I have never done before in my life." He got up, walked over to Linda, took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips for a very long time. Then he turned to Tom and said, "Now, that is what your wife needs three times every week." A little confused, Tom scratched his head, looked at Linda, looked at the therapist, and said, "Okay, if that is what you think is best, I'll bring her in on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays."

Oh... if healthy relationships were that easy. Truth is -- relationships take work. Whether it's a relationship with husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, parents, children (no matter what age), friends, coworkers, whatever the case; healthy life-giving relationships take work – hard work.

In order for our relationships to survive the conflict we need to somehow forgive. Forgiveness is a key element in making our relationships work. Forgiveness is not easy. Anyone who has ever been in a relationship knows how important forgiveness is. Forgiveness is one of those things that takes almost all of our energy

Have there been times in your life when someone has hurt you and forgiveness was the furthest thing from your mind? You're steaming mad, seething, smoking hot, and then they have the nerve to come to you and ask for your forgiveness. Does that ever happen to you? And how hard is that? How hard is it to forgive a person who has wronged you? And yet, withhold forgiveness and all kinds of unhealthy junk creeps into the relationship.

Peter, comes to Jesus one day, now Jesus has just spelled the process of trying to rectify a broken relationship in the church. So Peter comes and asks Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Old Testament Rabbinic Law said that a person was to forgive three times, after that, forget it. I wonder if Peter thought he was being gracious and merciful at 7 times. Jesus says, "Not seven times, but I tell you forgive another church member seventy-seven times." Now some translations interpret the Greek as seventy times seven times. That's 490 times.

So in my brain I say, okay so does that mean that at the 78th time we don't have to forgive? Or at 491 can I take revenge? Is there a numerical limit to forgiveness? Of course not! That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is using a huge number to point out a huge teaching. Seventy-seven is meant to be a number at which we could never arrive. We can never keep track of that much forgiveness. Can you imagine keeping track of how many times someone offends you for the same thing and you get to 68 and you go – “was that 68 times I forgave you or was it 67?”

It's almost as if Jesus is saying that forgiveness shared with one another in the church is endless. That's because Jesus is saying that's how God is with us. God's mercy and grace and forgiveness are never ending.

So Jesus tells a parable – this story to make his point. It's a great story. I love this story. Jesus says, this guy was forgiven a large debt by the king, but then refuses to forgive a debt owed him which was five hundred thousand times less than what he owed. Unable to pay, the second guy is thrown into prison by the first guy. The chance of this second guy repaying the debt while in prison probably isn't going to happen.

The parable describes the people's reactions. They report to the king what has taken place. The king summons the first guy and demands an explanation. “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

Let me put this into perspective... The first guy owed let's say, half a million dollars and was forgiven the entire debt. In a lifetime he could not have paid off that debt. Get the picture? And he is forgiven that debt. The second guy his neighbor owed him 50 bucks. Fifty dollars and the first guy wouldn't forgive him that debt. Can I have a “Whoa...!” Do you see the discrepancy here?

Jesus is pointing out how much God has forgiven us. God's forgiveness is endless. God sees us as forgiven sinners. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven. We are to live as forgiven sinners.

Turn to one another right now and say that to each other – “you are a forgiven sinner.” It is so important that we say that to one another. We need to be reminded of that regularly. Every morning this week – when you get up and look in the mirror this week tell your self that “you are a forgiven sinner.” It will change the way you live your life. You are a forgiven sinner...

Now I wonder why is it so hard for us to forgive? Maybe it's because we haven't developed the tools to forgive. We're not really into conflict resolution. We've been taught to fight it out or flee – fight or flight. Let's face it – we are naturally selfish, and most of us never really learned how to deal with our conflicts. I believe there is a better way.

I Googled “conflict management” on my computer and I got over 10 million hits. One page offered “Ten Tips on How to Win an Argument.” From that list I developed my own

“Seven tips on how to win an argument.” Now let’s have a little fun here. Check them out. I put them up on the screen here...

1. **Call them names.** *Especially names that start with A, B, C and F. This gives you a sense of moral superiority over them and you score big points with this one.*
2. **Point out their deficits.** *Their lack of intelligence, or their unattractiveness, or the clothes they wear. This always scores points. Say whatever you can to hurt them before they hurt you.*
3. **Blame them for the argument.** *They started it, by doing whatever they did, or by being born. The problem is never your fault. You are an innocent victim and they need to know that. Again and again.*
4. **Gloat.** *Whenever you score a point, point it out and demonstrate your glee. Your goal here is to continue making yourself feel superior and make them feel as awful as possible.*
5. **Scream, yell, get emotional, or go silent.** *Whatever it takes to show your anger, and do so with great drama. What better way to get their attention, scare them, or steal the show. The more hysterical, the better.*
6. **Remind them you’re right, they’re wrong.** *Keep believing that you are right 100% of the time. It’s not you it’s them.. Of course, remind them that you are always right, especially when you’re angry.*
7. **Refuse to apologize.** *Tell yourself, they were awful and they should have to come to you in the first place. Tell yourself that again and again. Justify yourself and dismiss how you contributed to the mess. (From www.pmttoolbox.com)*

Of course this is not really helpful is it? But you know we do these things all the time. We’ve been taught this way haven’t we? And we make the situation worse. Jesus says there is a better way. Jesus says we are to begin first with, we are forgiven sinners.

Now forgiveness is not easy. But if we begin with the fact that God has forgiven us this endless amount of mercy and grace in our lives it makes it easier to do what I’m about to share with you. I want to offer you a four step process for conflict resolution. This can work in any relationship. It’s not easy but it does work. If you are willing to invest in one another as Jesus invests in us -- these four steps are possible and can breathe new life into our relationships.

Step 1: Identify the hurt. Accept it. We hurt one another. Accept the fact that you’ve been hurt and something isn’t right. Get a handle on those feelings because so often we speak out of those feelings instead of the truth about the situation that something isn’t right. Recognize how you contributed to the problem. The key here is to focus only on what *you* have done to harm the relationship. Rarely is only one person at fault. Identify the hurt and share how you contributed to the conflict. Two wrongs don’t make a right.

Step 2: Apologize. There's really no way to say this other than to say – take responsibility for your own actions, and apologize. Rarely is it a one sided thing. We often always contribute to the problem. Resist the urge to rationalize what you did, or to blame the other person. Apologize and you will unlock the door of reconciliation.

Step 3: Forgive each other. This is where it get's real hard. It's a matter of willingness not feelings. Forgiveness *is* facing the painful wrong that has been done to us and realizing that something is not right. Forgiveness *is* choosing not to hold it against our spouse, brother, sister, children, friend, coworker, partner, and releasing them into God's hands. Forgiveness is a process of letting go -- of working towards healthy relationships of give and take. We need to let go.

The Greek word for “forgiveness” means to “to send off, to hurl, to release, to let go.” To forgive is more than just saying it. To forgive is an active, wildly enthusiastic process of dismissal. It's like this – forgiveness is like when a football player scores a touchdown. And they do that football score dance in the end zone. They throw the football down... that's the image of forgiveness. When we forgive one another Jesus is saying that we ought to do a dance (show them). Wouldn't it be cool if... think about this for a minute... Picture being in the fellowship hall for coffee hour today and people are dancing all over the place and somebody who is visiting us for the first time says, “Now what in the world are they doing?” We could say, “Oh, a person just scored a point for the kingdom of God and they forgave somebody.” Can I have an “Amen”? (Do the dance again) Wouldn't that be cool?

So forgive each other. And do it with gusto – that's the point.

Step 4: Begin again, together, differently. Your relationship is going to be different on the other side. If you can get to this point, the intimacy goes up, trust goes up. And the relationship is forever changed and strengthened so that the next time a conflict comes up it's a lot easier to solve.

Oh we want to hold on don't we? But when we hold on and we fail to forgive our anger turns into hatred, and hatred sucks the life right out of us.

We are forgiven sinners. Now... you may try these steps and it doesn't work. Your situation may be so difficult that you need professional help. Get it! Because what we are talking about here is our relationships with each other in the church. We can apply these steps in our relationships outside the church.

We pray every week, “forgive us our sins (trespasses) as we forgive those who sin (trespass) against us.” We only do that by the grace and mercy of God that's been poured out for us on the cross of Christ. May his cross be our guide when it comes to our relationships. Because so often we're heard people say, “I'll forgive but I won't forget.” I'm here to tell you, forgive and remember... remember Jesus says, “seventy-seven times.” Amen.