**New Math** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Psalm 103:1-13; Matthew 18:21-35 Saint Paul, Minnesota
September 17, 2023

To forgive or not to forgive, *that* is the question!

Susan Pendleton Jones, the former director of special programs at Duke Divinity School, shared two real life stories [from her experience as a pastor] about the complex challenges that forgiving ourselves and others present to all of us.

First, she said, *“each time the invitation to the table was offered he sat silently in the pew. Others would excuse themselves as they passed in front of him, but he never moved. When I visited him at his home, I cautiously broached the subject. ‘I can't do it,’ he answered. ‘I can't come to the table. You see, in Vietnam I killed a man. I don't think God could ever forgive me for that.’*

*Second, she said, “as we sat in my office tears welled up in her eyes. ‘I hate him. I can't believe I'm saying it, but I hate my own son-in-law. I hate what he's done to my daughter and now what it's doing to my grandchildren. You may have noticed, Pastor, that I get up halfway through the service and leave. I feel like such a hypocrite, harboring these feelings while trying to worship God. I just can't do it anymore.’"[[1]](#footnote-1)*

You see, both of these persons had been Christians all their lives. Yet unresolved issues involving *forgiveness* were jeopardizing their relationship with the church. What both of them recognized is that there is an important connection between their struggle with forgiveness and their faith; what they failed to see is that the practice of their faith should be central in resolving the issues of forgiveness with which they struggled. They were allowing their inability to forgive—or be forgiven—to cut them off from fellowship in the body of Christ, the very community that should be helping them work through and resolve these difficult issues.

Matthew 18 asks: *"How do we keep the church community together when forgiveness needs to happen right under our own roof? How should the Christian community deal with pain and trauma that lurks so closely at the door? What is expected of us as we learn how to be Christians?"[[2]](#footnote-2)*

These questions, however, are not limited to *church* and *home,* they also apply to *society* writ large. For example, you may recall a book, published in 2015, by the late Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho Tutu. Desmond Tutu was the former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town. He chaired South Africa’s *Truth and Reconciliation Commission,* which was created by Nelson Mandela’s government in 1995 to help South Africans come to terms with their apartheid past. His daughter Mpho Tutu is also an Anglican priest.

In their book, The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World, they include accounts of *injustice, torture, and murder* endured by blacks under the racist apartheid system, as well as amazing examples of aggrieved South Africans who decided to forgive rather than retaliate.

The Tutus criticize *retributive justice* and advocate instead for *restorative justice.* Retributive justice, reflected in most of the world’s judicial systems, is based on the assumption that those who do harm must be punished. The Tutus insist that restorative justice is the way of Jesus because it is based on redemption, and on the assumption that no act is unforgivable, no person unredeemable.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let’s take a closer look at our parable in Matthew 18 and see if this is true …

Simon Peter comes to Jesus with a question about forgiveness. Imagine how he must have felt. He knows what people are like, how easy it is to hold a grudge, to become bitter, to offer forgiveness once, twice, maybe up to three times as Jewish tradition permits. Wanting to be generous, Peter proudly steps forward to answer his own question. *"As many as seven times?"* he asks. He was willing to go the extra mile—and then some.

But Jesus has something different in mind. Whether you read his answer to Peter as *"77 times"* or *"70 times seven,"* the point is the same. Jesus answers Peter by telling him not to assume that you can count how many times you offer forgiveness and then be done with it. *Forgiveness must become a practice—a commitment—that is to be sustained and renewed each day throughout our lives. It is not a single action, feeling or thought. Forgiveness must become an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with God and with others.* Peter asks how generous he should be, yet he is still asking about limits. He's thinking *quantitatively* while Jesus answers *qualitatively*—with the offer of limitless forgiveness. This is what God is like.

And because we have been abundantly forgiven by God, we are able to forgive others in turn. *There is a direct connection between forgiving others and being forgiven.* Therefore, in the Lord's Prayer we pray *"forgive us our debts or trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

The parable of the *unforgiving servant,* which follows the exchange between Peter and Jesus, focuses on those who are willing to receive God's forgiveness *but are unwilling to offer it to others.* The servant has been forgiven a huge debt and yet is unwilling to forgive even a small debt owed to him. Such unwillingness shows, though, that he really is not able to receive God's forgiveness. For truly to receive forgiveness is to recognize how extravagant God's gracious forgiving love is and, in response, to offer it to others.

*Yet* if we are honest, there are times when we find ourselves behaving like that unforgiving servant. *We are pleased with the idea of a forgiving God, but not if it would require us to change our lives.* Forgiveness becomes something *we claim* but fail *to proclaim* in our living. We too often sound like George Eliot's description in Adam Bede: *"We hand folks over to God's mercy and show none ourselves."[[4]](#footnote-4)*

It is difficult to be *forgiven* and *forgiving* people. It takes time and involves struggle.

The Tutus’ book, *The Book of Forgiving,* is helpful here—it’s a useful *how-to* handbook that helps us wade through a profoundly complex topic. Interspersing their recommendations with personal narratives, the Tutus move us through *a fourfold path* that’s universal and practical: *tell the story, name the hurt, grant forgiveness, and renew or release the relationship.*

The basic truths undergirding the forgiveness model are simple but extremely challenging: *there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of or beyond forgiveness.* In spite of Mpho’s horrific memory of seeing her murdered housekeeper’s body, and in spite of the barrage of violence her father faced in his lifetime, they both assert that there are no monsters, *only monstrous acts.* We are human beings, intimately connected with one another, *who became separated from our goodness.* We need a process of forgiveness that returns us to our core. *“Our nature is goodness,”* they write. *“If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another.”*

One of the biggest strengths of the book, in addition to its practicality, is its *holistic approach.* While forgiveness is a central practice in many faith traditions—*and the Tutus point to Christ on the cross as their model*—the authors push us beyond spiritual motivations to forgive to *physical, moral, and relational reasons.* Equally important is the Tutus’ effort to dispel the *myths* of forgiveness. *It is not a subversion of justice, a denial of the harm, or a forgetting of the event. It is not an airy-fairy act of the saintly, but a matter of gritty reality.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

So, where are you in all of this? Do you perceive this to be *good news* or *bad news?* Are we destined to be stuck in the never-ending cycle of *retributive justice?* Punishment? Can we see the wisdom of moving toward *restorative justice? Rehabilitation? Restoration?* Do we believe, like the Tutus—and Jesus—that there are no monsters, just monstrous acts?

There are no easy answers to these questions.

Perhaps this story can help. I first heard of the exemplary work that *Father Greg Boyle* was doing with gang members in East Los Angeles in July of 2018 when he was the daily worship leader and preacher at *The Chautauqua Institution.* He believes that violence is learned, and that Jesus would hang out with gang members. But he rejects the idea that gangs are in any way a force for good.

Boyle, you see, never intended to get into *gang ministry.* Upon returning from working with base communities in Bolivia in the 1980s, he told his Jesuit superiors that he wanted to learn Spanish and minister among the poor. They sent him to Dolores Mission in East Los Angeles, one of the poorest parishes in the nation. And one of the bloodiest.

Boyle started by getting to know members of the neighborhood’s *eight gangs* that were shooting at each other. He found that what gang members need most *is love and jobs.* He visited gang members in jail after their supposed brothers had long since lost interest in them, bringing them toiletries and words of encouragement. He remembered their birthdays. And when they got out, he had amassed enough clout with them to ask them to distance themselves from the gang—for example, to stop *“tagging”* (painting gang graffiti in public spaces).

For people who rarely received affection from or even knew their biological fathers, Boyle offered something powerful. *“If gangs are places of conditional love,”* he explains, *“the antidote is unconditional love. Life in community.”* Eventually Boyle’s ministry led to the founding of *Homeboy Industries,* which finds and helps create jobs for former gang members.

Homeboy Industries operates a silkscreen printery, a bakery, and the Homegirl Cafe, where female former gang members work. It offers job placement, legal aid, counseling (two trained professionals work full-time) and classes on anger management and life skills. Many kids come to Homeboys straight from jail. As ex-cons they can’t get an ID card or public aid and have trouble getting a job and a place to stay. That’s when intervention is most likely to help.

Homeboy’s most dramatic ministry might be Ya ’Stuvo (a slang version of “it’s over” in Spanish), a tattoo removal service. Gang membership is frequently marked by tattoos, often in prominent places on the body. For active gangbangers, the tattoos symbolize that they’re in the gang for life. I saw several young men with tattoos across their forehead or the bridge of their nose or on their ears. Who would ever hire them?

Boyle’s work is rooted in his Jesuit vocation and training. *“We’re called to be in the world what God is: lovingkindness.”* When asked how he never runs out of love for these love-hungry kids, his answer sounds simple: *“It’s the Christ in me worshiping the Christ in you.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

It should come as no surprise that Boyle’s latest book, which came out a year ago, is titled *Forgive Everyone Everything.*

Friends, Christian communities are sustained by people who know what it means to discover the miracle of God's forgiveness, and who are thus committed to a way of life as forgiven and forgiving people. It’s a model [at our best] that we can uphold for society, as well. We do not abandon others and refuse to be abandoned ourselves. We cannot rest content with conflict or division or even with "conflict management"; we aim for the more difficult and more rewarding practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. As we live in communities shaped by these practices, we will experience anew what it means to be forgiven—and forgiving. Perhaps then, when the invitation is offered, all of us will come to the table joyfully.

1. Susan Pendleton Jones, *Forgiven and Forgiving: Matthew 18:21-35,* The Christian Century, August 25, 1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Buchanan, *The Path of Forgiveness,* The Christian Century, April 15, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Susan Pendleton Jones, *Forgiven and Forgiving: Matthew 18:21-35,* The Christian Century, August 25, 1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: the Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World,* Harper One, NY, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jason Byassee, *Gangs and God: How Churches Are Reaching Out,* The Christian Century, September 18, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)