

**ORDER OF WORSHIP with TEXTS**  
**Sunday, May 17, 2020**  
**Homework: Forgiveness**

- I. **Countdown** (Homework Square Graphic)
- II. **Prelude** (Diane)
- III. **Intro Reading: Colossians 3:13** (Drew)  
Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.
- IV. **Welcome** (Rachael)
- V. **Opening Prayer** (Rachael)  
**Holy God, even from a distance, our spirits are gathered together to worship you. Bless us with your presence and open our hearts to your Spirit. Hold us in grief, sustain us in waiting, help us to consider the needs of others, and draw us always nearer to you. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.**
- VI. **Song/Hymn - Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing**  
UM Hymnal Number 400, verses 1 and 3  
Words: Robert Robinson, Music: Wyeth  
Public Domain

Come, thou fount of every blessing  
Tune my heart to sing thy grace  
Streams of mercy never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise  
Teach me some melodious sonnet  
Sung by flaming tongues above  
Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it  
Mount of thy redeeming love

O to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be  
Let thy goodness like a fetter  
Bind my wandering heart to thee  
Prone to wander Lord I feel it  
Prone to leave the God I love  
Here's my heart O take and seal it  
Seal it for thy courts above

**VIII. Reading: Acts 7:55-60** (Laura)

But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

**IX. Video: WHAT IS Forgiveness** (Harris)

Have you ever done something you knew was wrong?

And then after, you felt kind of sad and guilty inside?

I hope you had someone in your life who could show you forgiveness.

When someone helps you make things right or accepts your apology, that's forgiveness.

Forgiveness means that even when we are angry or hurt, we can still love people at the same time. And when we have done something wrong, people can still love us, too.

It feels good to know that there are people who will love me even when I do something wrong. I might still get punished for doing something wrong, and I will have to say I'm sorry, and I might have to help fix things.

But all of us need to know we are loved.

God loves us like that. God watches us do things we know we shouldn't do. Like being selfish, saying mean things, taking something that doesn't belong to us, or disobeying our parents.

God definitely wants us to do better. And the best part of forgiveness is that when we ask God to help us do better, God will help us. We can pray to God and apologize and God will give us strength to apologize and make things right.

God wants us to forgive other people, too. That means accepting their apologies or helping them fix a problem.

When someone does something that you don't like and you get angry at them, you can forgive them for what they did. It will give them a chance to do better, and it will make you feel better, too. It's like a brand new day for everyone.

God, thank you for forgiving me. Help me forgive others. Amen.

**X. Song: Dave**

*Majesty (Here I Am)*

*Contributors: Ben Fielding, Morgan Reuben*

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**XI. Offering Intro/Prayer of Dedication** (Laura...already recorded)

**XII. “Offertory” Music: Gronewold Twins**

*How Beautiful* by Twila Paris

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**XIII. Video Forgiveness Story** (submitted anonymously; read by Laura)

*This morning’s testimony about forgiveness comes from a member of our church family who has asked that their identity be kept anonymous. The story is a powerful one, of hurt and pain and of forgiveness as a process that takes time and healing. Hear these words from your sibling in Christ with compassion:*

As a recovering codependent, I’ve had some really traumatic relationship experiences, including the relationship with my kids’ dad.

When I was pregnant I worked 60 hours on my feet, with sciatica, and he refused to work more than part time or help with the housework. We lost the home I had purchased myself because he would compulsively spend our money on worthless things before I could pay the mortgage.

I thought I would have to give my child up for adoption because I was so poor and was so severely depressed I had wished for a way to die without hurting her. When I went to the hospital to have her, I had to drive myself because he was too tired. He just kept asking me how much longer it would be and then he left me for a few hours while I was in labor.

People would sometimes tell me they saw him cheating on me with other people, but I would never believe them. And then once, about a week before another of our children was born, I found out he had a girlfriend the whole time I was pregnant. I remember her calling me several times, while I was caring for a newborn, as she wanted me to comfort her and answer her questions while she cried because she was hurt that he wasn’t divorcing me.

He lied constantly. He threw a huge charity event while we were married and then used the money to buy things for himself and his friends instead. After I had a baby, I had worked hard to lose all my baby weight in 9 months, and he needed to point out that I was still “jiggly” so don’t stop working at it. After I had another baby he got mad that I wouldn’t go to the gym only two weeks after giving birth.

The worst was feeling completely alone, unloved, and uncared for at my most vulnerable while pregnant and raising babies. Now, in divorce, he does not fulfill his responsibilities in caring for his children’s needs.

The past 4 years I’ve worked really hard at healing my codependency issues. Last year, God showed me how I was carrying around all this pain, disappointment, injustice and hate and that it was time to let it go and work toward forgiveness for my ex-husband and other men in my life.

I started by acknowledging and owning my part in the dysfunction of my relationships. I know that I want God to forgive me which means I had to forgive others. I chose to believe that I was loved the best way these people knew how. I chose to believe that when they were abusive to me, it wasn't personal and it was more a reflection of how they felt about themselves. I chose to focus on the positives of what my ex-husband is doing by showing up for the kids and loving them instead of leaving.

I chose to be more careful with my words and also to stop my friends and family whenever they started speaking poorly of him, and refocus on the positives. This Father's Day, I want to send him a Father's Day Card for the first time in years, pointing out what he does right so I can help support him in being the best dad he's capable of being.

And the best part of this story..

A month after I decided to let it go and forgive him, I was randomly contacted by the child support office. At this point I had completely given up on collecting any part of the over \$25,000 I was owed. Some people at the county had always been bothered by my case and even though they are supposed to be neutral, they wanted to help me. I started getting regular child support payments for the first time in over 6 years. It's not a lot, but it's something.

Actually, the best part of the story is not carrying around the weight of all the burdens in the past.

Although sometimes I catch myself forgetting I've chosen to forgive and have to let it go all over again.

I've learned that forgiveness is acknowledging equality and that God loves the other party as much as me. I am not superior or inferior to them. God's love is for everyone.

#### **XIV. Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-35 (Marna)**

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

“When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

“Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

“When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## **XV. Sermon**

### **2020.05.17 Sermon on Forgiveness (Rachael)**

Over this month, we’ve been tackling a series called Homework here at UMCA. We’re considering different characteristics that people of faith display as skills that need to be practiced. Each week, as we look at another skill that followers of Jesus need to be attentive to, some of us are probably feeling a sigh of relief. I’ve got this. I know how to do this. I’m going to do well on this assignment.

Others of us, from week to week might be cringing inside as the skills we tackle together feel overwhelming, impossible, or like an inevitable look at our personal failures.

Patience. Humility. Compassion. Have these skills been easy or more challenging for you to consider, practice, and develop in the recent weeks?

Today, we are going to talk about another characteristic skill of the Christian life: forgiveness. And, I must admit that this is an assignment with which I am struggling. Here’s why: it is very clear that forgiveness is part of being a follower of Jesus in both directions - we receive forgiveness from God and we offer forgiveness to others. That’s what Christians do. At its core, that makes for a pretty straightforward assignment. Be forgiven and forgive.

But our lives aren’t straightforward, are they? We can make this assignment to practice forgiveness very complicated very quickly.

Does someone have to be sorry before we forgive them?

What if they did real, lasting damage to us or someone we love?

Do we really have the power to forgive, or is that for God to do?

Can I forgive someone for something they did to someone I love or only for something they did directly to me?

How do we exercise forgiveness in situations that harm our community or a whole group of people?

Is it even fair to ask a victim to forgive someone who abuses or oppresses them?

Can we expect to be forgiven for something if we haven't really done the work to change our behaviors or our systems to ensure the harm won't be continued or repeated?

How do we begin to work toward forgiveness and healing when there is so much harm, so much pain, so much unresolved hurt in our world?

Even when we don't have all the answers (spoiler alert: I don't have the answers), these questions and others you might be asking about forgiveness help us explore how to love God and one another well.

Today we heard three reflections from Scripture about forgiveness. First, Drew gave us the descriptions shared with the early church in Colossae of a life in Christ, which includes among other ways of being in community, forgiving each other.

This makes sense, doesn't it? If you have relationships in your life, you already know that a spirit of forgiveness and a desire to work out differences will help those relationships to thrive. Conversely, if someone chooses to harbor every wrong against them, making a list of how others have harmed them and living out of resentment, that person will struggle to have meaningful, life-giving relationships.

A spirit of forgiveness, in friendships, families, relationships, marriages, neighborhoods, and church congregations, goes a long way in building life together that feels like God's kingdom right here on earth.

Pastor Laura read us a story from Acts about what was happening for the very first followers of Jesus as they began to organize and grow into faith communities. At the time, there was internal religious turmoil among Jews who were choosing the Way of Jesus and proclaiming him to be the Messiah and the religious institution that was threatened by this movement. Stephen was one of the early martyrs of the church, killed by a mob when he refused to deny his faith in Jesus. As the story goes, even as Stephen experienced this tremendous pain and suffering, he had a vision of God's glory and asked God to treat his attackers with mercy.

That's an extreme story of forgiveness. Stephen's ability to desire God's forgiveness for his attackers even during the attack is beyond what we might fathom. This suggests that Stephen has so oriented his life in God's kingdom that even in suffering, injustice, extreme pain, and death, he remains aligned with God's purpose and trusts in God's grace. Scholar Timothy B. Hare notes Stephen's ability to forgive. He writes, *As the angry crowd throws stones, Stephen prays, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Though most of us would struggle to adopt Stephen's attitude under such circumstances, we are helped by the knowledge that forgiveness*

*is rooted not so much in the strength of human will but, rather, in the vision of “the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”*

The challenge, then, of practicing forgiveness is to recognize first that we will be most successful when we rely on God’s perfect mercy rather than our own human capacity. For us, forgiveness is less a ‘practice makes perfect’ skill and more a ‘practice, practice, practice’ skill, one in which we become more successful the less we try to do it on our own, instead learning to honor the glory of God and to entrust one another to God’s abundant mercy.

I also heard this, and I imagine you did, too, in the powerful testimony Pastor Laura shared with us this morning from someone in our congregation. We received the pared down, most palatable details of the story of someone beloved to us who has practiced the growing edges of forgiveness over years of healing from abuse, pain, and shame. The forgiveness offered in this person’s story does not undo the harm caused to her. It does not remove the accountability of the abuser to someday address his own repentance. However, this incredibly brave person has found strength and courage in God’s presence to live with forgiveness.

We get caught up in the details when we want to debate or define a word like forgiveness. Perhaps, though, forgiveness is more something we practice in our being than in our doing. To live as forgiving people, we rely on God’s glory and presence and power to overcome our hurt and pain, suffering and shame. We recognize the ways God continues to forgive us and invite us into God’s story.

And even when the details are impossible to work out in our heads, or when on our own we cannot overcome what’s been done, we allow God to work in and through us to restore us as we forgive others. As a preacher, I sincerely wish this were an example of something easier said than done, but I fear it’s not easy to talk about OR to do.

Marna read for us this morning from Matthew’s gospel some of Jesus’ words about forgiveness. In this passage, Jesus is talking about forgiveness within the community of believers. He is not addressing larger systems of oppression and abuse, but rather how these who are in the family of faith should address their grievances with one another.

Before we dive in too far, it’s important to note that this passage could, if we are not careful, become a passage we use to inflict more harm upon others, rather than to grow God’s kingdom. This text can and has been used to tell victims of oppression, violence, and abuse that they need to forgive, at least seventy seven times. People with power and privilege might (do) quote Jesus in order to silence or diminish the stories of those who have been marginalized generation upon generation. And so, I want to pause to see how Jesus is taking on the big picture and the smaller picture here at once. First, God’s forgiveness is for us. In the big picture, God’s kingdom economy is based on forgiveness, grace, mercy. We receive these resources freely from God and we are expected to give them away. They are infinitely abundant. We

should be prepared as followers of Jesus to share that forgiveness with others. If we cannot do so, we will not experience the fullness of what life in God's kingdom is like.

In the smaller picture, our lives and relationships will be more fulfilling when we practice forgiveness and do not hold others' actions against them as a debt that builds and builds. Forgiveness opens our own hearts to healing and hope.

This text does not entitle us to dictate others' experiences of harm or injustice. Indeed, if we wish to be builders of God's kingdom, we need to share and celebrate our own stories of forgiveness, both the receiving and the offering of it. And also, we need to own up to more confession. More repentance. More accountability and seeking of forgiveness from God and one another. What debts do we desire God to forgive in us? How are we prepared to forgive others who ask us for the same?

Desmond Tutu was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. He was the Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa until 1996. He served in the 1990s as the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by South African President Nelson Mandela to take the practice of forgiveness and healing to the national level as South Africa emerged from generations of apartheid.

In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu writes the story of the Commission and its work, sharing why and how forgiveness became an essential tool in the long work ahead of South Africa's people, work that continues to be necessary yet today.

Here is one of his reflections on forgiveness from the closing chapter of the book:

*Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness of the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing.*

Forgiveness, the TRC learned, was *neither cheap nor easy*. Tutu also writes, *Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our existence.*

This last week I've spent much of my prayer time asking God's forgiveness for the ways I continue, as a white person in America, to benefit from white supremacy. As I grieve the shootings of Ahmaud Arbery and Doug Lewis and Breonna Taylor, I lament before God the racism and violence that plague our communities. What debts of my own comfort do I owe to the suffering of others? I've had to examine and ask myself if I am really prepared to seek

forgiveness, and when I do, what responsibility am I prepared to take in working for justice for others. This, as Archbishop Tutu said, is not easy or cheap.

In God's kingdom economy, forgiveness has currency. We have big wounds to address with one another, in all their awfulness, abuse, pain, and degradation. At the same time, if we wish to enter into the most difficult spaces well, we have practice to do. We do this practice, much like Pastor Laura described last Sunday, in the day to day routines of our lives.

Becoming people of forgiveness, I suspect, is less about finding the perfect definition or working out all the terms and requirements. Forgiveness is more about what we are cultivating in our hearts - our capacity to see the full humanity of our neighbors, our willingness to believe stories that seem impossible to our own experience, and our ability to look more sincerely at our own sin and recognize how much grace God is showing us every single day.

Amen.

**XVI. Song:**

*Grace Alone, The Faith We Sing 2162*

*by Scott Wesley Brown and Jeff Nelson*

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Every promise we can make  
Every prayer and step of faith  
Every difference we can make  
Is only by His grace

Every mountain we will climb  
Every ray of hope we shine  
Every blessing left behind  
Is only by His grace

Grace alone Which God supplies  
Strength unknown He will provide  
Christ in us, our cornerstone  
We will go forth in grace alone

Every soul we long to reach  
Every heart we hope to teach  
Everywhere we share His peace  
Is only by His grace

Every loving word we say

Every tear we wipe away  
Every sorrow turned to praise  
Is only by His grace

**XVII. Pastoral Prayer (Laura)**

**XVIII. The Lord's Prayer** (kids, already recorded)

**XIX. Spoken Benediction, Share Practicing Forgiveness** (Rachael)

**XX. Sung Benediction: The Lord Bless You and Keep You**

**XXI. Postlude**

played by Diane Gronewold on the UMCA organ

*Festive Voluntary by Robert Lau*

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