

About 12 years ago, I was going to officiate a service in an area I didn't know at all. I purchased a GPS (they were still new then and didn't come standard in cars) and since I was going through Boston, I made sure to leave early. I actually wound up very early. Since I had about an hour to spare, I decided to drive around the neighborhood for a bit. I was only 5 or so minutes from the chapel and I still had more than 30 minutes to spare when a big rental box truck parked in the road two cars in front of me and 3 large men ran into a house. They emerged carrying chairs, couches, and other furniture. And they went back in and came back out with more items. This went on for about 20 minutes. Finally, with the service starting in mere minutes, I began to panic. I got out of my car in my robe and approached the truck. As I did so, they jumped in and took off. I think they were repossessing the furniture. Either that or stealing it. Truth is, I'm not sure.

Furniture can be re-possessed for nonpayment. Cars can be repossessed when payments aren't made, and homes go into foreclosure when the mortgage isn't made. Fines are imposed, interest skyrockets, and wages can be garnished when credit card payments aren't made on time. This is what debt looks like in 2019. In the year 31, when you couldn't pay a debt your car or house or furniture wasn't taken: you were. And sometimes your family was, too.

Those who held the IOU quite literally had the chance to cause torment to others. They could call in the debt and if the debtor couldn't pay, they could have them thrown into jail where prisoners had to rely on friends on the outside to bring them the basics—including food. *You could cause pain and suffering OR you could have mercy upon the debtor and forgive the debt.*

The lesson I'm sharing today is one we already know. We know it so well we can (and do) it off the top of our heads, yet this reminder is as significant as the lesson itself. It's a lesson on forgiveness. And the way God treats us. (Which is as we treat others.) We know we're supposed to forgive because in the Lord's prayer we have that tricky word "as". Forgive us AS we forgive our debtors. It's right there.

Yet, so often we choose not to forgive and instead to do something unique to humans—we bear grudges. Anger, in the short term, can save our lives as it can trigger the fight or flight response; but in the long term, it can ruin our lives.

Not only can it make us bitter, resentful, and stand-offish, but it can lead to physical problems. Anger can raise our blood pressure, cause our jaws to clench, give us stomach pain, keep us from sleeping, make us depressed, cause skin problems and even cause heart attack and stroke.

The Australian government's better health website describes the physiological effects of anger. "The adrenal glands flood the body with stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. The brain shunts blood away from the gut and towards the muscles, in preparation for physical exertion. Heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increase, the body temperature rises and the skin perspires. The mind is sharpened and focused." (1)

This is typically fine when anger results in getting us out of situations where we can be hurt or compromised...and once we're beyond it, the anger dissipates. However, if anger is long term, rather than short term, we can suffer ill effects due to the stress chemicals that flooding our system.

We may say, "To heck with so and so" and cut that person out of our lives, but are we really sending that person to '...heck' or are we putting ourselves there by breaking off our relationship? I'm talking today about anger and forgiveness because they are connected. And they're connected because we live in relationship.

When Jesus showed us how to pray, he specifically utilized the plural—evocative of community. OUR father...give US...OUR daily bread...and—wait for it, Forgive US as we forgive OTHERS.

There's a place in Utah called Pando. It's an enormous grove of trees.—actually about 47,000 of them. It sure looks like a forest of lots of the same kind of tree? But it's more than that. This grove of trees is actually one organism. All of these trees share the same root system.

How would our lives change if we believed that were true of humanity? How could our world change?

These are the words of author and peace advocate, Norman Cousins: I am a single cell in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind. I am a single cell. My needs are individual but they are not unique. I am interlocked with other human beings in the consequences of our actions, thoughts, and feelings. We are single cells in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind.

In the church, we call ourselves the Body of Christ. When body works in tandem, all works together. When a part over-functions—it crowds out the other parts and brings illness. When we come from a place where grace permeates every one of our actions and interactions, it's easy to be in community. But the truth is that being in community is hard work (because we don't forgive easily). Church is a great place to come and get inspired, but it's also a place to be reminded of our higher calling. The way we're to interact in community. The way we are to be a community.

The **root** of “**forgive**” is the Latin word “perdonare,” meaning “to give completely, without reservation.” (That “perdonare” is also the source of our English “pardon.”) In ancient times, Jewish people were taught to forgive three times, so when Peter asks Jesus about forgiving someone who has wronged him, he thinks he's being generous by asking, “How many times should I forgive him? Seven?”

Seven, by the way, signified **completeness** or perfection in ancient times.² So Peter probably thought he was being magnanimous. But Jesus takes it further. Not seven, he declares, using hyperbole as a tool, but seventy times seven! Just keep doing it is the underlying message.

It's easier for some of us to forgive. Really. Because we're hardwired with a propensity toward empathy. About a year ago, there was an empathy study conducted in Europe. Researchers studied almost 50 thousand people whose DNA was analyzed by the company 23 and Me. They were studying empathy. The researchers looked at ten million genetic variants and found that your genes can actually make you more empathetic. That said, Dr. Vaurm Warrior, one of the authors of the study also said, “A large chunk seems to come from non-genetic factors.”³ Those include environmental and cultural factors.

When we have empathy, we can have compassion and compassion breeds forgiveness. Any of us can choose to forgive for our own benefit knowing that it's better for our health, but the outcome is similar to telling a child to say they're sorry. A defiant “I'm sorry” with an implicit “I'm not sorry!” doesn't have the same benefit. Jesus tells us you have to forgive with your whole heart.

Whether or not we've got the genes and we can actually experience empathy (that is, feel what another person is feeling); we can have compassion—the willingness to relieve another's suffering. At it's Latin roots, compassion means 'to suffer with'.

In personal interactions, though, we often act as though there has to be a winner and a loser. When something happens to us, we think we're the victim. Without being in another's head. Without knowing their intention. Without knowing their motivation.

Last week, I took my car for an inspection and I met a woman also waiting for her sticker. We got to talking and I told her that I'm one of the pastors here. She said she has a cross in her car. Then she paused for a moment and said, “I think it's easier to have a cross in the car or an icon on a wall than it is to have Jesus in here (touching her heart). Following Jesus isn't an easy path. It calls us to do things that can be hard—especially when it comes to relationships. And sometimes it calls us to 'repent' or 'change our ways'. Let me give you an example...

Pete and Repeat were in a boat. Pete fell out. Who's left? (Repeat.) Pete and Repeat were in a boat. Pete fell out. Who's left? (Etc...) It's a pattern that continues until the response changes. Once someone says, “the other guy”, the game ends. When we ruminate about things that happened to us in the past and bear grudges without forgiveness, we are essentially saying “repeat” because we're carrying the past into the present. When can choose to employ empathy, compassion, patience, and forgiveness.

Ultimately, we need to do this because as we forgive others, so will we be forgiven. In Christ's time, Jewish people believed in the vengeful angry God of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus taught us that God is love. And he also said we are to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Always. No matter what. Forgive not once, not three times, not seven times, but seven times seventy. (Always.) And you will be forgiven. Blessed be and amen.