

***“Forgive More”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent**  
**February 18, 2018**

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

<sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? <sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. <sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

**Introduction**

The season of Lent in which we now find ourselves, is a season of preparation for Easter. Traditionally, Lent is a time of self-reflection, acknowledging the places where we have sinned and fallen short, and then repenting of our sins and our sinfulness in order to draw closer to God and to grow more into the persons that God has created us to be.

An easy way to think about Lent is to consider the joy with which Jesus’ resurrection is celebrated on Easter morning. In order to fully understand why being saved from the consequences of our sin is such a glorious thing, we should probably have an idea of how prevalent sin in all of our lives is. That’s one of the things we do during Lent.

To that end, it is tradition for Christians to give up something that brings them joy or comfort during Lent: chocolate perhaps; desserts, the internet. For some people, this becomes a way of sacrificing something important as a way of symbolically feeling some of the pain Jesus felt on the cross. It can also be a way of removing something that takes our attention so that we can better focus on God. Giving-up something can be an act of spiritual dedication and commitment, or a way to cleanse ourselves in preparation for the resurrection.

I won't begrudge people the tradition, but I don't think giving-up things for Lent is the most productive way to observe the season, either. To give-up something for Lent means to abstain Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It's a season of self-denial but only Monday to Saturday. Sundays are considered "mini-Easters" so you can indulge on Sundays. So, for a lot of people, that can become a part-time, symbolic ritual that doesn't really do much. If you're counting the days until Sunday when you can have another brownie or another cigarette, you're not really focusing much on God anyway.

But in the passage, we just read from Isaiah, the prophet is critical of rituals and fasts that are performed out of a sense of tradition or obligation. True worship of God is found not in rituals, Isaiah argues, but in changed lives.

So, I have come to believe that the best way to observe Lent and to honor Christ is not by giving-up something, but by *adding* something to our lives; not by having less of a thing we love, but by doing more of the things that will make us better disciples. For that reason, over the next four Sundays, we will be talking about some of the things we should do more.

Since Lent is largely about sin and repentance, it seems logical to me that we should first talk about forgiveness. Listen for what God needs us to hear in these words on forgiveness from Matthew 18:21-25.

**Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."



**Sermon: "Forgive More"**

In this parable, we find the story of a servant who was forgiven a large sum of money by his master, 10,000 talents to be exact. If you remember from a few weeks ago, a single talent is roughly the equivalent of what the average day laborer would earn in 16 years. Now I'm not sure what sort of exchange rate we're getting these days on ancient Roman currency, but let's look at a general modern equivalence.

Minimum wage in Ohio is \$8.15/hour which at 40 hours a week, works out to just shy of \$17,000.00 a year (That is a whole separate justice issue that we really need to talk about... but not right now). Since a talent

is 16 years wages, and the first servant was forgiven 10,000 talents, we can calculate that in our modern terms he was forgiven a debt of a little over 2.7 billion dollars.

That's stupid money. That's greater than the Gross Domestic Product of 29 countries.<sup>1</sup> How does an individual rack up that kind of debt? Especially in the first century with no professional sports teams, multinational corporations or politicians to buy? How doesn't really matter. What does matter is that this first servant has accumulated an outrageous debt, beyond his ability to pay or even to have any hope of paying; not even if he worked several hundred lifetimes. And when the King decides to sell him and his family to recoup some of that amount, the servant begs for mercy.

"Have patience with me and I will pay you everything," he says. Which is either a lie or a fantasy or simply the pleading of a desperate man whose only hope is the magnanimity of the one to whom he owes more than everything. And we are told that "out of pity" the King released him and forgave the debt. Not that he renegotiated the debt or put the servant on some sort of payment plan or garnished his wages going forward. He forgave it completely. What then should be this man's response?

When he walks out, he is a new man with a new lease on life; one who has truly experienced pure grace. And then this servant comes across another slave who, as it turns out, owes him a considerable debt, too - 100 denarii. The denarius was the equivalent of a single day's wages.<sup>2</sup> So, 100 denarii, in our modern calculation, comes out to about \$6,500, a considerable sum, but doable. Does our servant pay his own good fortune forward? Nope. He holds his own debtor accountable and demands payment be made. His memory is short and his indifference, long.

When the King hears about this, he is more than angry, and he withdraws his gracious offer. The first servant is forgiven an impossible debt, but cannot in turn forgive a much, much smaller one. The principle is established: the proper response to God's forgiving our sins, is to forgive those who have sinned against us.

And we remember that Jesus tells this story to his disciples in answer to a question that Peter asked about how far he is expected to go in his forgiving others. How often should I forgive? As many as seven times? The number seven is significant because it symbolizes completeness. If you do a thing seven times, you do it completely.<sup>3</sup> So, Jesus' answer ups the ante. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." And many translations render that "seventy times seven" which is even more. The point is, forgive beyond forgiving. Never stop.

Sometimes those words are easier to stomach than others. Someone who cuts you off in traffic; the person who made you late to your appointment; The child who spilled juice on your cellphone.

In 2015 the Taipei Arts Center hosted an exhibition of 55 valuable paintings donated by collectors. A 12-year-old boy walking past a 350-year-old still life by Pablo Porpora, tripped, and falling towards the painting, reached out to catch himself, accidentally tearing a fist-sized hole in a work of art that had been appraised at a value of \$1.5 million dollars. The curator of the exhibit, was so shocked at the news that he couldn't speak for a few minutes, but he forgave the boy<sup>4</sup> because he was more worried about he and his parents putting too much pressure on themselves than he was about a painting, no matter how "valuable."<sup>5</sup>

We've all probably had experiences like that, something small, or understandable, or a complex situation with which we can empathize, and forgiveness may come pretty easy. You might even be able to laugh about it later. Moving on with your life isn't difficult to do.

But life doesn't always give us easy scenarios like that. In 1979, Matthew Boger was assaulted on a Los Angeles street. At only 14 years old, he had been kicked out of his home after coming out to his mother as gay. The group of men who attacked him that night, claimed to want to "kill the faggots." They left him for dead, but he recovered and lived a relatively peaceful and successful life. 26 years later, Matthew began volunteering at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

According to their website: "The Museum of Tolerance (MOT) is a human rights laboratory and educational center dedicated to challenging visitors to understand the Holocaust in both historic and contemporary contexts and confront all forms of prejudice and discrimination in our world today."<sup>6</sup>

While working there, Boger met and became friends with another museum volunteer named Tim Zaal. What neither man knew at the time of their meeting, was that Tim had been one of the thugs who brutally beat Matthew that night so long ago. Through their conversation, Tim revealed that he was a reformed white-supremacist, and while sharing their stories, their previously unknown shared history became apparent.<sup>7</sup>

What would you do in that situation? Could you forgive? Matthew Boger found a way.

But it wasn't that easy. Matthew says that he didn't want to forgive Tim, because doing so would feel like letting him get away with what he had done. But over time he was able to work towards forgiving his attacker. And once he was able to do that, he began the process of forgiving his mother for the hurt she caused when she threw him out of her life.<sup>8</sup>

Forgiveness is hard, because it can feel like we're saying, "That's okay, don't worry about it, it's no big deal" when in actuality, it's NOT really okay, and we ARE still worried about it, and it really IS a big deal." Forgiving someone can leave us feeling unsatisfied or worse, powerless. Holding onto that grudge on the other hand, can feel pretty empowering.

The movie "Pitch Perfect"<sup>9</sup> illustrates my point. In it, a fictional acapella group named the Barden Bellas are on a quest to become "aca-awesome." There's a scene where a member of a rival acapella group (Think "Sharks" and "Jets," here) throws a burrito from a moving bus at Amy, one of the Bellas, hitting her square in the chest and face, splattering beans and cheese all over her. A little while later, after cleaning up, one of her friends says to her "Um, Amy, you've still got a little burrito there behind your ear." To which Amy replies "Leave it. It fuels my hate fire."

I think that's how we deal with other people's transgressions and offenses against us. We tend to hold onto them. The anger feels powerful. And yet we keep coming back to Jesus's words... "not just seven times, but seventy-seven times..."

So how do we do that? How do we put Jesus' challenging words into action? What exactly happens when we forgive? Well, take out your pen and flip your bulletin over to that little place that says "Notes," because today I'm going to give you something to write down there that I hope will help after you leave.

**1. Forgiveness is a defining point of our Christian identity.**

“The great Christian writer George Herbert said, “‘He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven.’ Our forgiveness begins as a response to our being forgiven. It is not so much an act of generosity toward our fellow human beings as an act of gratitude toward our forgiving God.”<sup>10</sup>

We see this principle embodied in the parable Jesus taught his disciples. We forgive because God has first forgiven us.

**2. Forgiveness doesn’t mean acceptance or approval of what has been done nor does it mean that a relationship is restored to “normal.”**

Forgiveness includes honesty. Call a thing what it is. When we forgive someone who has hurt us, we have to acknowledge that what they did was damaging, even as we begin the hard work of letting go and healing.

When the victim of abuse confronts his or her abuser, forgiveness is the goal, but that doesn’t mean that he or she must then return to the situation as if nothing had happened and face the possibility of more abuse. It is good to forgive, but forgiveness does not require submission to more of the same.

**3. Forgiving someone doesn’t necessarily mean they are released from the consequences of their actions. We are still accountable for what we do.**

Watching the news this week about the murder of two Westerville Police officers,<sup>11</sup> and then the murders of 17 students and staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida<sup>12</sup> left me sad and angry. And I can’t imagine what the families of those people are going through, and I pray to God that I never do. But I know that eventually, I will be expected to forgive the people who caused this wanton destruction; And I will try. But they will still need to answer in court for their crimes and accept whatever sentence is handed down.

You can forgive someone and still turn them in or testify against them or hold them responsible. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we turn a blind eye and just accept. It means we work for justice, not out of malice and desire for retribution, but out of a desire to help them be accountable for what they’ve done.

Being forgiven by God means that we are not made to face the eternal consequences of our sins. But we are not necessarily released from their earthly consequences.

**4. Forgiveness is not a once and done singular act.**

Forgiveness is a process. It is something we do over and over and over again.

Scarlett Lewis lost her six-year old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012. If anyone has a right to hold a grudge, it’s her. Yet she has chosen not to. In an essay she wrote for the Forgiveness Project, she described how:

*“Forgiveness is central to my resilience. A social worker came to my house shortly after the incident. Kneeling down, with her hand on my knee, she said, ‘I know how it feels; I’ve also lost my son and I’m here to tell you the pain will never get better.’ At that moment I thought, “That is absolutely not going to be my journey.”*

*“And so, I chose the path of forgiveness. Initially it felt as if the shooter was attached to me by some umbilical cord and all my energy was being sapped. Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors to cut the tie and regain my personal power. It started with a choice and then became a process with no neat ending. One day I can forgive and the next I may hear a detail of what happened in the classroom and feel anger all over again.”<sup>13</sup>*

Jesus says not just seven times but seventy-seven or seven times seven. Forgiving is a daily process. We don't do it once. We have to keep doing it, intentionally, over and over and over again and maybe ... one day ... we don't need to any more. But it's not simple. Forgiving another person is not a once and done thing. It takes as long as it takes and there may not be a neat ending.

### **5. Forgiveness is not for them. It is for us.**

When a person admits they've hurt you, stops doing what they were doing and repents; really changes their life, being forgiven can be a powerful thing for them. And when someone comes to us and is repentant, asking for our forgiveness, it is our duty and our responsibility as Christians to work towards that forgiveness. Even when it's hard.

But we are called to forgive others, even when there is no confession or repentance and plea for mercy. Remember Jesus' words, “not just seven times, but seventy-seven times.” We are expected to forgive like it's our job because that's exactly what it is. But here's the good news: forgiveness is as much about the person doing the forgiving, or more, as it is about the person being forgiven.

When we forgive another person, it sets *us* free from the pain of what was lost; it releases *us* from the desire to see them suffer the same consequences we have, it lets *us* get on with our lives and stop dwelling on the hurt and the pain that they caused.

Sometimes, often, professional counseling can help with that. I highly recommend it. But there is also an act of the will to remind yourself that the other person's transgression does not define you. What has been done does not become the last word in your life and your anger does not become the defining characteristic of your relationship. Forgiving removes the power that event, and the memory of that event holds over you.

Forgiving another person doesn't just set them free from their guilt, it sets you free from your pain.

In their book on the Lord's Prayer, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write that:

*In commanding us to forgive, Jesus is inviting us to take charge, to turn the world around, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of retribution and vengeance. We don't have to silently suffer the hurt, lick our wounds, lying in wait for the day when we shall at last be able to return the blow that was dealt us. We can take charge, turn things around, be victors rather than victims. We can forgive.”<sup>14</sup>*

And the ability to do that, to forgive others, grows from the realization that we have been forgiven and set free from the worst that we have done in our lives. Because God has forgiven us and paid a dear price to do so, we must find it in ourselves to forgive one another. And with God's help, we can. And now is a good time to start.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “List of Countries by Projected GDP.” *List of Countries by Projected GDP 2017 - StatisticsTimes.com*, StatisticsTimes.com, 23 Apr. 2017, [statisticstimes.com/economy/countries-by-projected-gdp.php](http://statisticstimes.com/economy/countries-by-projected-gdp.php).

<sup>2</sup> Peeler, Kimberly R. “Denarii, Denarius.” *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, D-H, Abingdon Press, 2007, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Boring, M. Eugene “Seven, Seventh, Seventy.” *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 5, S-Z, Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 197-199.

<sup>4</sup> Meno, Andrea. “5 Priceless Treasures That Got Destroyed In Stupid Dumb Ways.” *Cracked.com*, Cracked/E.W. Scripps Company, 17 Feb. 2017, [www.cracked.com/article\\_25285\\_5-priceless-treasures-that-got-destroyed-in-stupid-dumb-ways.html](http://www.cracked.com/article_25285_5-priceless-treasures-that-got-destroyed-in-stupid-dumb-ways.html).

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Bryony, and Wayne Chang. “Boy Trips, Punches Hole in \$1.5 Million Painting.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 26 Aug. 2015, 1220 GMT, [edition.cnn.com/2015/08/25/asia/boy-trips-punches-hole-in-painting/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/25/asia/boy-trips-punches-hole-in-painting/index.html).

<sup>6</sup> “Our History and Vision.” *Our History and Vision - Museum of Tolerance | Los Angeles, CA*, Museum of Tolerance: A Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum, [www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tml6KfNVLtH/b.4866027/k.88E8/Our\\_History\\_and\\_Vision.htm](http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tml6KfNVLtH/b.4866027/k.88E8/Our_History_and_Vision.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Boger, Mathew, and Tim Zaal. “Matthew Boger and Tim Zaal.” *TheForgivenessProject.com*, The Forgiveness Project, 11 Dec. 2017, [www.theforgivenessproject.com/matthew-boger-and-tim-zaal](http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/matthew-boger-and-tim-zaal).

<sup>8</sup> Boger, Mathew and Zaal, Tim, *TheForgivenessProject.com*

<sup>9</sup> Cannon, Kay. *Pitch Perfect*. Performance by Anna Kendrick, et al., Brownstone Productions/Universal Pictures, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Willimon, William H., and Stanley Hauerwas. *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life*. Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Grinberg, Emanuella, and Kaylee Hartung. “Wife of Ohio Police Shooting Suspect Said He Previously Threatened to Kill Her.” *CNN.com*, Cable News Network, 11 Feb. 2018, 8:05 PM EST, [www.cnn.com/2018/02/10/us/ohio-police-officers-killed/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2018/02/10/us/ohio-police-officers-killed/index.html).

<sup>12</sup> Grinberg, Emanuella, and Eric Levenson. “At Least 17 Dead in Florida School Shooting, Law Enforcement Says.” *CNN.com*, Cable News Network, 14 Feb. 2018, 11:44 PM EST, [www.cnn.com/2018/02/14/us/florida-high-school-shooting/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2018/02/14/us/florida-high-school-shooting/index.html).

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, Scarlett. “Scarlett Lewis (USA).” *TheForgivenessProject.com*, The Forgiveness Project, 2 Aug. 2015, [theforgivenessproject.com/stories/scarlett-lewis-usa/](http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/scarlett-lewis-usa/).

<sup>14</sup> Willimon, William H., and Stanley Hauerwas. *Lord, Teach Us*, p. 84.