

“Forgiveness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 16, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 24

Luke 17:1-4

*Summer Worship Series – A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love
for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves*

At this point in our Sermon Series, *A Curriculum of Love*, you might be wondering if loving your neighbor means that you have to let them do whatever they want and just keep loving, accepting, and dealing with it. After all, isn't that forgiveness? Isn't that what Jesus is telling us: that we must forgive those who sin against us not once or twice, but seven times in one day?

Besides not judging our neighbor, I think Christians struggle the most with this concept of forgiveness. When they tell me stories of what has happened in their lives – the harm that others have done to them – I can understand their resentment and anger. From neglect to physical and verbal abuse, the pain is deep and real. How do we forgive that?

We tend to think of forgiveness as letting someone off the hook, not feeling angry with them anymore, or forgetting what they've done. In reality, forgiveness is none of those things. When we pressure people into forgiving without first honoring their pain, if they are told to just forget and move on, it can cause immense guilt and spiritual damage.

From the cross, we hear Jesus say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

And yet, as theologian Miroslav Wolf contends, “Deep within the heart of every victim, anger swells us against the perpetrator, rage inflamed by unredeemed

suffering. If anything, they would rather pray, ‘Forgive them not, Father, for they knew what they did.’”¹

How can we faithfully hold onto the tensions among the command of Jesus to forgive, the very human desire for revenge, and the need to make justice and hope available both for the victims and the perpetrators of evil? Without adequate resolution of these tensions between the feelings of anger, the desire for revenge, and the need for forgiveness, there is a real possibility that those of us who seek to battle evil may find ourselves become the agents of it instead.

Forgiving does not mean excusing. To forgive someone does not imply that his/her behavior is acceptable. Forgiveness assumes wrongdoing.

Vengeance is God’s. But, *anger belongs to the victim.*²

While no one has the right to fly off in a rage, too often anger is buried and suppressed which leads to unhealed trauma. So, if you have been hurt, be angry. Feel it and express it in appropriate ways. For example, if a friend deeply hurts us, we might be tempted to forgive them without addressing it, allowing ourselves to be continually punished by their thoughtless actions. Or we might lash out and judge them as a horrible person, ending the relationship. But a third way is to honor the pain. We may tell them how we feel; and, if they repent, we can do some repair work. On the other hand, if in the conversation we discern that this is no longer a safe or healthy person to be around, we can set up boundaries, so they don’t harm us anymore. That includes potentially walking away.³

In Romans 5:8, Paul writes that, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Handing over the issue of revenge to God’s grace means letting go of it. When we let go we must be open to the possibility that God will not act in the ways we might hope or desire God to.

In the absence of forgiveness, rage can enslave us, trapping us in an endless spiral of revenge and counter-revenge. Violence becomes unending, and evil finds a permanent residence in the hearts of human beings and human communities.

¹ As quoted by John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*

² Swinton

³ Siri Strommen, *A Curriculum of Love*

Both the comfort and the scandal of Christian forgiveness are that it offers the potential of redemption to *all* people, even those who have committed the most horrendous forms of evil that we could imagine. And yet, those who commit evil are not quantitatively different from those who do not. Evil actions do not finally define persons.

It is people whom we forgive, not acts.

As Christians, we know that we should forgive; even if at times it is an incredibly difficult thing to do. In these verses in Luke, Jesus is speaking specifically about forgiving someone who repents. In the gospels, repentance is not just empty words; it means to turn around, to change course. For someone in the community who has sinned, a failure to repent – and, thus, has failed to open themselves up to the possibility of God’s forgiveness – it would, indeed, be like wearing a millstone around their neck and being thrown into the sea. Without grace, none of us can escape the consequences of our own sin.

In other parts of the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that they must be willing to forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven. We hear this and wonder: how this could be possible, or even healthy, for us to do. Why would we do such a thing as Jesus describes: pardoning these sins – what others have done to us – over and over again?

If we assume forgiveness is an event, then for many of us the act of forgiving will be impossible. However, if we assume it to be a *process* that we participate in not simply as individuals but also as communities, then the frame changes and forgiveness, or at least the slow and sometimes painful movement towards forgiveness, becomes a possibility.

While Jesus tells us to forgive – which is a lofty task – he isn’t giving us any task he can’t do himself. The ultimate case of this is when he is on the cross and has the immense capacity to see the people jeering at him, wanting him to suffer and die, hating him, and knowing it has nothing to do with him. They are stuck in a version of reality that only sees enemies, that seeks violence and cruelty. Only in our insanity do we wish for any of that.

Jesus’ cry of “Father, forgive them” draws us uncomfortably to the realization that we are sinners *and* that we need to be forgiven *and* that even the

worst sinner is loved by God and worthy of respect, forgiveness, and possibly reconciliation.

Full reconciliation may never be possible, but the road to forgiveness begins with the words, “No I cannot – but I know I should.” Jesus tells us we should forgive others – that failing to do so is like putting a weight around our neck – and that it is a foundational way to love our neighbors.

Forgiveness is perhaps the most radical gift that God calls us to accept and share as we struggle to resist the evil that surrounds us. Forgiving sins is the Christ-suffering required of his disciples. As the German resistance leader Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “Forgiveness is a mode of sharing in the suffering of Christ.”⁴

So, to summarize, when someone hurts us, we can let ourselves experience the feelings that it provokes in their fullness, without judging ourselves. Then, we remember this person, like every person, is included in God’s grace; that it is the person we forgive, not the acts they have committed. Finally, we decide how to proceed. Maybe a conversation is needed, steps toward reconciliation, or even repair work. Or maybe it calls for establishing a new boundary to protect ourselves. Forgiveness is not an event, but a process that takes as long as it takes; and only you (and God) know the right outcome for the situation.⁵

Let us pray: *Loving God, we hold onto so much resentment, hurt, and fear about what has been done to us in our lives. Help us to see things differently. Help us to let go, forgive, and move forward with more strength and compassion. Amen.*

⁴ As quoted by Swinton

⁵ Strommen