

Risen Lord, speak to us; challenge us; love us. Amen.

I once had a friend I would go to the movies with on occasion, or out to brunch. One day she asked me to cash a check for her – this is before cash machines, my friends; yes, I am that old. She gave me a check for \$40; I gave her the cash. Well, the check bounced. That can happen – but she never made good on it. She never repaid me. I could forgive the debt, but not the offense. And rather than try to work it out, or forgive her, I just let the friendship go. I told myself she wasn't that close a friend. My grievance was legitimate, if petty, but was my response?

Jesus would say no. In the story we heard last week, Jesus was teaching his disciples how to deal with conflict. Directly, honestly. Not to go around people, but go to them, first alone, then with others if need be. Let there be open dialogue – and if it works, there is reconciliation. He didn't say anything about forgiveness, but Peter must have been listening hard, for he asks Jesus, "Hey, how many times am I supposed to forgive that person who hurt me? As many as seven times?" That sounds like a lot, right? Wrong! Jesus says, "Not 7 x 7 – 70 x 7." And lest we think math will save us and we can stop at 490 times, remember 7 is one of those mystical, infinite numbers. Jesus is saying there is no end to forgiveness; forgive the same person again and again if need be. As God has forgiven us, again and again.

Now, most of the time when we have trouble forgiving, it's for a very good reason. Someone has done something unforgivable. I like to turn the word around – when we forgive, we "give for." Someone owes us something, and we give it for them. So we're out twice. But we also release them, and more importantly still, release ourselves.

There are at least two reasons forgiveness is not optional for Christ followers. One, not forgiving is corrosive and perpetuates the effects of the offense in us; not forgiving hurts us more than it hurts the one we won't forgive. And two, we are called to be peacemakers, and if we want to be effective in that ministry we can't be carrying grudges. And we can't be judging. We can't really forgive another person while we're still judging them. The moment we are injured or insulted, our perspective gets distorted.

We lose compassion, and forget that we are fully capable of being self-centered and hurtful ourselves. When we judge another person, we forget that we are broken, and that the person who hurt us is broken in some way. Paul said it: *Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.* When we're judging, forgiveness is almost impossible.

When we refuse to forgive another, for whatever reason, we forego our freedom. We stay stuck, and they stay a part of us. In retaining, we restrain, constrain, both ourselves and the person we are refusing to forgive.

When we don't forgive, we get spiritual arterio-sclerosis.

Unforgiven sin is like plaque, cholesterol, whatever you want to call it, and it builds up and constricts the flow of that living water through us.

It can even lead to physical ailments.

No amount of Lipitor is going to get rid of it – we have to forgive with God's help.

Jesus talked over and over again about the importance of our forgiving others, of loving our enemies. He even said that we are not able to receive God's forgiveness if we have not forgiven those who have offended, hurt or angered us. Not because God is punishing us, but because our unforgiveness blocks the flow of God's healing, forgiving love in us.

Is there anyone in your life towards whom you still feel a bitterness and sense of injury?

We usually know when an offense has been retained and not forgiven, because when we talk about it, the emotions are like it happened yesterday. I've heard people repeat hurtful conversations word for word, only to find it happened 25 years ago!

Sometimes we need to be willing to forgive ourselves for something we consider unforgivable. Are you holding on to some guilt you cannot let go of?

Or we might need to forgive God – for not protecting us when we were harmed; for not giving us what we prayed for with all our heart; for not healing those we loved. Not because God owes us, but because God wants us to bring our true feelings to him. Do you need to release God's power in your life by forgiving?

Now, what about when we can't forgive?

Forgiveness is something we have to practice, work at. And we have to pray at it.

I once heard a healing minister speak, who could not forgive someone for a huge wrong. This inability to forgive was really impeding her ministry. One day she was praying and thought of that verse in Galatians, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...*” and she realized that Christ could forgive this person. So she grudgingly prayed, “It’s okay if you forgive her...” and that started to clear the log jam. Gradually she was able to forgive the woman herself, and this huge burden was lifted from her.

God has entrusted to us this awesome ministry of reconciliation, and we need always to move toward where the greatest freedom lies. Freedom is the goal of our life in Christ – freedom allows us to be amazingly effective disciples, spreading God’s peace wherever we go. God doesn’t want us encumbered, blocked up; God wants us clear and free, so God’s living water, amazing power and peace can flow through us unimpeded.

One time I was visiting a friend on the coast of South Carolina, who lived on a former rice plantation. He was always draining one pond and filling another, to get the water where he needed it. He’d put a pipe between two ponds, to get the water flowing to the second one. Problem was, the beavers kept building dams where the pipes were. That’s what beavers do – they build dams.

So we were out in the truck, and he noticed this water wasn’t flowing, so he got out and took a long-handled thing and began to poke in the water, and to grab bits of muck and grass that and pull them out. This looked like fun, so I jumped out too, and grabbed a second long-handled thing and started to pull out muck too, taking apart this nice little dam the beavers had built. And at one point, my stick got stuck – so I pulled, and I pulled, and I pulled loose a big wad of mud and muck – And whoosh! Suddenly you could hear the water just go right through the pipe. It began to flow with complete freedom, and took the rest of the muck with it.

That’s what the work of forgiveness and repentance does in the Christian life. We get at the muck, the plaque, anything that impedes the flow of that living water through us and through our lives. This world of ours, this community of ours needs us to be peacemakers. This is work we need to do. So let’s take this opportunity to clear out some muck and let the River flow! *Amen.*

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand....

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.