

“Teach Me”  
Matthew 18:15–22  
Sunday, March 17, 2024 (Lent 5)

Let us pray: Teaching God, we want to learn your ways. We want to learn the ways of forgiveness. We want to learn the ways of grace. We want to learn your ways of love. So as we prepare to listen to your good Word, quiet the noise in our minds. Center our spirits to focus on you, so that we might learn and hear what we have missed in this story before. Meet us here. Speak your truth. Help us listen, in Christ. Amen.

Earlier this year, we gave out *star words*. If you're not familiar with them, these are little pieces of paper, shaped like a star, and on each one is written a word. Words like grace, blessing, generosity. And the idea is that this word is supposed to guide you through the year, like the star guided the wise men to Christ; that by being mindful of this word, trying to live out what it says, will help draw us closer to Jesus. If you *didn't* get one, it's not too late. We have a basket down here. You can come up after worship and take one (without looking at it). Don't put it back if you don't like it. See how God might use that word in your life this year.

But I'm curious, those of you who *did* take star words, would anyone be willing to *share* what your star word was? The first year we did this, my word was *opportunity*. And at first, I kind of thought, “That's not the kind of word I was hoping for. I want a more *spiritual* word like grace or trust.” The next year, my word was graciousness. That was *kind of* better. But I ended up having amazing experiences with those words. They really did open me up to new things. They *became* spiritual words and practices for me.

So this year, I was open to anything. I knew that whatever word I got, God would use that to do something in my life. So I reached in, pulled out a star, and the word that I got was *forgiving*.

There's my "spiritual" word; ask and you shall receive. And my first thought was, "Great. What situation am I going to find myself in this year that is going to require me to be forgiving?" Or maybe worse, "What situation is going to require me to *seek* forgiveness?" That means something is going to go wrong this year! Because you don't just get the word *forgiving* on a star and then *magically become* a more forgiving person. God gives you *opportunities* (my *first* star word) to *practice* forgiveness.

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And this is essentially what is happening with Peter and Jesus. Jesus is teaching his disciples about forgiveness. "If another member of the church sins against you, first, you go to them one-on-one and talk about it. You don't go to someone else and talk about it; you go to *them* and try to resolve the problem. If that works out, great! If it *doesn't*, then take one or two other members of the church along with you to help this process out. If that *still* doesn't work, then bring it to the whole church.

But Peter says to Jesus, "How many times should I forgive someone? Seven times? That seems like a lot." And – the Greek here is unclear – Jesus either says, "Not *seven* times but *seventy-seven* times," or, "Seventy *times* seven." The point is not to get hung up on the numbers, on *keeping track* of how many times you have forgiven someone. Peter is essentially saying, "Teach me how to be a forgiving person." And Jesus' response is, "It's not going to happen just like *that*. This is something you have to *practice* over and over and over again. The way you learn to forgive is *by* forgiving."

Now, I want to pause here for a moment and think about what forgiveness *is*. Because a lot of people have a lot of different understandings of what it *means* to forgive someone. If I said to you, "Hey, you need to forgive that person," what would that *mean* to you? For some people it

would mean that you have to go back to the way things were *before* whatever happened and act like it *never* happened. Other people say, “I can *forgive*, but I can’t *forget*.” Some people think that forgiveness means that you are *okay* with whatever this person did to you. Some people think that forgiveness depends on the other person showing remorse, that they are *sorry* for what they did, and *now* I can forgive them.

Here’s how I think we are called to understand forgiveness. This is what it comes down to: how do *you* want *God* to forgive you? Do you want *God* to say, “Well, I can *forgive*, but I can’t *forget*?” I don’t know about *you*, but I would like God to *forget*. And the good news is that there are multiple places in scripture, both Old and New Testament, where God says, “I will forgive your sins and remember them *no more*.” Which would suggest that to forgive *is* to forget. When Jesus says here, “Senty-seven times,” or, “Seventy *times* seven,” it’s like he’s saying, “Forgive them so many times that you can’t even remember what you are forgiving them for in the first place.”

Now, we push back against that, because we think it means that this other person is going to take advantage of our forgiveness, or that we have to put ourselves in a position where we are going to get hurt again. So, first I would say, no one ever said forgiveness is *easy*. The *idea* is simple, but *practicing* it is the hardest thing you will ever do.

But I *also* want to stress that there is a *difference* between *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. Reconciliation is the healing of the relationship, where two people can continue being in relationship and living life together. Reconciliation is the hoped-for goal of forgiveness, but it is not always possible (in *this* life). Because reconciliation involves repentance *and* forgiveness. It

involves one person saying, “I am sorry,” and the other saying, “I forgive you.” It involves *both people* coming to a new place and the relationship being transformed. That’s reconciliation.

*Forgiveness* is about *you* letting go. Letting go of what this other person did. Not holding it against them anymore. Not trying to punish them or make them pay for it anymore. And your ability to let go of something does not depend on anyone else but *you*. No matter what this other person does, I can choose to let go of it, to not hold onto it anymore and carry it around with me. What are *you* holding onto, carrying around with you? And what would it look like – what would it *feel* like – to be able to let go of it?

Now, again, that doesn’t mean that the relationship is going to be restored, and you can go right back to living life with that person again. Sometimes *you* can let go of something, *you* can forgive, but the other person doesn’t change. Sometimes we have to *keep* forgiving them, *keep* letting go of it, over and over again, four hundred and ninety times, not so much for *their* sake but for *our own* sanity, but they just keep on doing the same thing. Reconciliation is not always possible in this life. But the good news is that this life is not all there is. There is always the *possibility* and the *hope* of reconciliation; that one day when we see this person (whether here on earth or in the kingdom of God), they have been transformed, and our relationship can be whole again. And maybe it is your forgiveness and the experience of grace that helps transform them.

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Today is St. Patrick’s Day. And a lot of the time, when we think about St. Patrick, we might think of how he used a clover leaf to illustrate the Trinity, or how he converted all of Ireland to Christianity or drove all the snakes out of Ireland. But let me tell you something about St. Patrick that you might not know. He wasn’t *born* in Ireland. He was born somewhere in northern Britain, maybe as far north as Scotland. And while his mother was a Christian, he

wasn't. But when he was 16, he was abducted by Irish pirates and taken to Ireland, where he was forced into slavery. For six years he suffered in slavery. And the thinking is that he came to faith through the people he was enslaved *with*. He had some sort of spiritual awakening while he was there. One day he was able to escape. It took him a few more years to get back home, and when he *did*, he went to a monastery, where he was trained as a priest. Happy ending, right? He made it back home to his family and friends. He could just live out the rest of his life serving God in peace.

Until one day he had a vision in which he heard voices calling out to him from Ireland, saying, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." So he left home again and went back to Ireland to share the good news of Jesus Christ. When he first came, the people there thought he was coming to get revenge. But Patrick said, "No, no, I come with *good news*." He brought more and more people to faith in Christ until it was said (somewhat exaggeratedly) that he converted all of Ireland.

But imagine what it must have taken for him to go back there. To go back to the people who made him suffer for years. They hadn't changed. And he didn't come to convert them like, "I'm going to *make you* come to faith in Christ!" He somehow found a way to let go of his anger and his pain and come to them in *love*. He had forgiven them, and he came to share with them the good news that had made that forgiveness possible. He came to them saying, "I have *good news* that is going to change your life!"

But even if this other person never changes, *you* can still choose to let go. *That* is the power of forgiveness.

You want to know what forgiveness looks like? It looks like the *cross*. Jesus *teaches* us how to forgive, and he doesn't just do that by *telling* us about forgiveness. He teaches us how to forgive by *showing* us. When he is dying on the cross, enduring unimaginable suffering and being *mocked* by those around him, Jesus *forgives* the very people who are killing him, *as* they are doing it. He says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." They haven't *changed*. They haven't *stopped* killing him. But Jesus finds it within himself to let go. To let go of anger, hatred, and the desire for vengeance. *That* is how Jesus teaches us to forgive.

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Throughout this Lenten series, we have been following the story of Peter and drawing from the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." And today's line from that hymn that parallels this story is, "Teach me." *Teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above.* A *melodious sonnet* is a poem or song that is pleasing to the ears. So, "Teach me a song that is pleasing to the ears." *Forgiveness* is a melodious sonnet. When someone says, "I forgive you," or, "Can you forgive me," those are beautiful words that are pleasing to the ears. That is a song that echoes throughout heaven.

And that line, "Sung by flaming tongues above," is a reference to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus' disciples in the form of flaming tongues. Here's what I think all of this means: Jesus teaches us the song, and the Holy Spirit helps us sing it. Because forgiveness is *hard*. And like Christ on the cross, sometimes it can feel like it is *killing us*. If we are left to our own devices, we might not ever be able to forgive (or *seek* forgiveness). But the Holy Spirit helps us, strengthens our trust in God, so that we can let go of whatever anger or pain we are carrying around with us. Jesus has forgiven us to set us free, so that we might set each other free, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.