

Where's the Manual?

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale

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Have you ever wanted a manual for Life? I sure have. How am I supposed to live as a human being with other human beings on this earth? It often seems very difficult. When I became a parent I desperately wanted a manual. I still want one. (If anyone has a spare, please see me after worship...)

We could use a manual for our churches, too. Something that helps us figure out how to live in community with one another. The scripture lessons from Matthew these past few weeks read a little like a manual. Sometimes this section of Matthew is called "the sermon on the church." In it Jesus lays out ideas of how to be together as a faith community.

Last week we got very clear steps on what to do when someone sins against us. How when conflict arises we should communicate directly with one another, in private, and then if that doesn't work, with a few witnesses, and then if that doesn't work, as the church body, and then, if nothing shifts, maintain a relationship with them as an outsider but with the doors always open, always welcoming anyone who wants to live in covenantal relationship with us.

So, if last week we got a process for how to deal with conflict, today we get the next step. When conflict happens, when we are sinned against, or hurt or betrayed or angry, what do we do about that, about those feelings?

When you think about it, there seem to be four options:

Amnesia: forgetting about it in a deliberate way or with a convenient episodic memory wipe a la Star Trek. Though how often are we told to forgive and forget...

Stewing on it: remembering over and over and over until we are filled with righteous anger or long standing grief

Revenge: oooh this one can feel good. How can I get them back?

Forgiveness: deliberately, consciously choosing to forgive the ones who hurt us

It is a tough choice. When you are hurt I can't imagine you are too different from me when I consider the options while in the heat of anger or pain. Forgiveness is not the first thing that comes to mind.

However, as faith-filled people, we look to what Jesus tells us and models for us. His message is clear: Choose forgiveness.

Now I'm sure this came up once or twice (or probably a thousand times) in the years that Jesus and his disciples tromped around the Holy Land together. Twelve strong personalities plus Jesus living rough with crowds of people pushing in all the time. Hmmm, sounds perfect for some conflict and score settling.

So, having just heard what Jesus said about conflict, Peter now wants to know: if we choose the forgiveness option, how many times do we have to do it? Seven? (That probably seemed like an extravagant number. There's Peter again, trying to get a gold star from the teacher). How often, Jesus? Then I can keep a book and keep track.

You see I'm not the only one who wants a manual, Peter does, too. I think we all do when it comes to the hard work of living in community. How do we do it? How does forgiveness work?

We hear fabulous stories of forgiveness. Nelson Mandela who forgave his captors who kept him locked up for 27 years. The parents of a teenager killed by a drunk driver who then bring the driver into the fold of their family. I don't know about you, but these examples actually aren't terribly helpful to me. They seem so massive, so unbelievable, so superhuman, while I am just here in my small little life struggling to forgive the grievances of my past and present, many of which are just petty in comparison. How can my lingering resentment at my college thesis advisor compare to apartheid?!

There is no comparison. And yet, if we don't figure out how to forgive, if we don't make forgiveness a part of our life and spiritual practice, we cut ourselves off from others, from our deepest soulful selves, and from God.

Holding onto a grudge, an old hurt, a wound, a perceived slight, and nurturing it in our cloistered inner depths only makes us hurt more and for longer.

Anne Lamott, contemporary writer and poet, wrote, "In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (1999) We are the ones who hurt and the hurts take up space and suck life and joy and hope down along with them.

Now, I do not believe that forgiveness is mandatory. I don't believe you or I will go to hell if we don't forgive. (Though on a side note, this is one of the foundational beliefs in the Amish community, and is why, when the horrible mass shooting happened at the Amish School about 10 years ago, by the afternoon of the shooting, relatives of the girls who died had already gone to the homes of the family of the shooter and offered them forgiveness. They had to they said or they themselves would not be forgiven by God.)

Forgiveness is not mandatory. But what I do know is that not forgiving can make your life hell right here on earth.

"To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem.... Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken." Marjorie J. Thompson, "Moving toward Forgiveness," *Weavings*, March-April 1992, 19.

Forgiveness actually releases us as much as if not more than our offender from the hurt and damage. We are set free .Because we no longer have to carry around the attachment to that act. We are not kept captive to waiting for their acknowledgment of the act. We don't have to be on their timetable of repentance. We can forgive whenever we choose, and we are then set free.

But we do have to give up something. In another Lamott quote at the top of your bulletin says, "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a better past." In forgiveness we come to terms with our inability to change the past. We lay down our desperate desire for things to have been different or for us to have made different choices. We put away the "what ifs.." We accept that what is done, is done. We cannot make a better past. And so, we let go.

This does not mean we don't seek reparations. This does not mean we don't seek justice from the law. And forgiveness is not reconciliation. Those are separate issues. What we can control is how we forgive in our own hearts.

Forgiveness also cannot be demanded from us. For many years Christian communities were complicit partners in domestic violence and sexual violence by telling survivors that they must forgive their abusers. That it was their Christian duty. In fact, for some domestic violence survivors, being told they do not have to forgive can be very liberating.

No, forgiveness is not required. Nor can it be compelled. (which is why, though I'm not thrilled with how this passage ends with the king--our allegorical stand in for God--then demands repayment from prison, the king does not actually demand that that servant forgive the debt of his comrade. He yells at him that he should. Mercy should beget mercy. But it can't be compelled.)

Forgiveness is a long process of transformation that God can work within us if we allow it. Forgiveness is not a one and done act, but is a long and messy process. In fact, in my own experience, forgiveness can only be accomplished with the help of God.

But without it, we continue to hurt. Even the Mayo Clinic has a section on their website and in their materials talking about how important forgiveness is to our emotional, social, spiritual, and yes, physical health. A person tied up in anger and pain at old wounds, has a body with more cortisol, the stress chemical, and a far greater chance of living with depression and anxiety and the corresponding illness they contribute to.

If we accept that forgiveness as individuals is difficult and essential, what happens when would look at the bigger picture and think about our church. Life together isn't easy, and communities of faith are messy, complicated places.

Churches can be difficult places to be with all our differing, sometimes conflicting, ideas and needs and hopes. Change happens from outside cultural forces and from internal personal and communal shifts. Changes brings conflict and forgiveness is a tool that can dissipate it. Forgiveness heals the body of Christ. It makes us whole once again. And it returns us to our mission to heal the world.

Dawn Chesser of the United Methodist Discipleship Ministries reminds us:

“Our local church exists not for those of us who are already a part of the body of Christ, but for those who are not yet here.

“The church you serve is not there simply for the purpose of taking care of its own members. Your church is there to serve all of your neighbors who are not yet part of your community of faith. Your church is there for the people outside your doors who are hurting, who are in need of hope and the good news that Jesus loves them just as they are. Your church is there for all the people who desperately need a community where they can find love and genuine Christian care and experience the healing and saving grace that Christ offers.

“In order to be able to do the job of loving others as Christ has loved us and offer Christ's love to our communities and neighborhoods, each congregation must be a healthy body. So Matthew's lesson teaches the community of faith how to be healthy and how to be accountable to one another in the way that Jesus has just outlined, without becoming mean or vindictive or stuck in a place of hurt and anger.

“Jesus says to all who would hold on to their pain and anger, all who would choose to sit around nursing their wounds for a lifetime, that only a congregation that forgives seventy-seven times—that is, as often as necessary—can maintain this life of accountability. According to Jesus,

Forgiveness is the key to congregational health.
Forgiveness is the key to moving forward and healing.
Forgiveness is a necessary part of the way we deal with our differences and conflicts.
Forgiveness is crucial to the way that we love one another as Christ has loved us.

“It isn’t that we are supposed to keep count and when we get to seventy seven times, we get to stop. The point of the saying and the story is that whoever keeps score is missing the point. Christian forgiveness is about the state of the heart.”

And so I ask you: what is the state of your heart? Is it hard or soft? Is it ready to lay down the burdens of calcified hurts? Is your heart ready to forgive or start down that path knowing it can take time? And is your heart ready to ask forgiveness of others who you may have hurt? Can our hearts be soft and open to the Spirit guiding us in paths of forgiveness?

What is the state of Pilgrim’s heart? Are we as a community ready to look at our conflict honestly and openly? Are we ready to acknowledge our hurts and old wounds? Are we ready to seek forgiveness from one another? Are our hearts ready to start down that path knowing it can take time? Can our communal heart be soft and open to the Spirit guiding this community in paths of forgiveness?

God is always present, always waiting for our return. God is always waiting to hear our prayers of confession and our requests for help with forgiveness. God’s love is so big, so wide, so deep, so present, that we need only ask and offer up a willing heart. God has the manual. Truly I say to you, God is the manual. We are invited into the freedom and grace that is offered.

Thanks be to God. Amen.