

Fuhgeddaboudit

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 18:21-35²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"²² "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven...."
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-19¹⁶ No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so.¹⁷ Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: "Forgetting" is a necessary component of being able to "for-give" – to give up to God--the hurts and injuries that are going to arise from our interactions with others.

"Fuhgeddaboudit...!" If you've ever seen a Robert DeNiro movie, you've probably heard that expression. According to the Urban Dictionary "fuhgeddaboudit" is an East Coast interpretation of the expression "forget about it." "Fuhgeddaboudit" means "the issue is not worth the time, energy, mental effort, or emotional resources."¹

This morning I suggest that "fuhgeddaboudit" is also an essential component of our calling from Jesus to be generous in offering forgiveness.

Back around Easter, Plain Dealer sportswriter, columnist and author Terry Pluto wrote about a friend's struggle with forgiveness. Pluto wrote,

Many of us go through periods in our lives where we can't forgive someone else ... Or we can't forgive ourselves.

Often, it's both.

We're feeling the life squeezed out of us because of forgiveness issues.

There are several aspects of forgiveness. It's not the same as reconciliation, where a relationship is completely restored. It's not wise to have close contact with some dangerous, vile people.

But we also can forgive them with the power of God so that we don't obsess over how they have hurt us.

Their actions don't define us as people.²

But, boy, doesn't it take the power of God to be able to forgive sometimes? Sometimes the hurt is so personal, or so disappointing, so injurious, or common and repetitious. Of course, sometimes what needs to happen first is not forgiveness but reporting: if someone is abusing you, perhaps, or you're hurting yourself or someone else, you don't accept that; you report it to someone trustworthy. But when we're offended or slighted, sometimes we have trouble seeing through or around or beyond the offense to envision a possibility for forgiveness to take its place.

"...We must request and grant forgiveness almost every day of our lives. Most of the offenses are trivial and unintentional. Forgiveness becomes problematic only when the trespasses are more serious, when they are intentional, and especially when they are repeated."³

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew Chapter 18 describes a king who relents to show amazing mercy to a servant. This servant was not some powerless pauper; in the ancient Near East

¹ "Forget about it." Cited in The Urban Dictionary at <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fuhgeddaboudit> accessed 10/19/2016

² Terry Pluto, "Faith&You--The power of Easter: Forgiving others—and ourselves." *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 26, 2016

³ Douglas R.A. Hare, Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993, 215-6

high officials in service to a king were called “servants.” This high official had embezzled a staggering amount of tax revenue – more than he could ever repay in his lifetime. The king ordered that the official and his family be sold into slavery supposedly so they could repay the debt, but practically, it was punishment; there was no way the official could repay the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars he had stolen. When the official begged for mercy, the king was moved to forgive the debt and declined even to prosecute the official.

Then, of course, that official with the new lease seeks out a colleague who owed the official a paltry amount. The official had that co-worker thrown into debtors’ prison. Other officials saw what the pardoned colleague had done to a fellow official and reported it to the king, who pronounced a sentence of life imprisonment upon the unforgiving servant.

Jesus told that story to support his shocking response to the apostle Peter’s question about the limits of forgiveness. Peter had asked, “If my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him?” Then Peter probably shocked his fellow disciples when he proposed an unreasonably high number: “Seven times?”

“No,” Jesus responded, “not seven times.” We can almost picture the disciples nodding with self-satisfaction, knowing that they would be viewed as exemplary if they forgave someone twice, maybe three times.” “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

In our imaginations we can hear their jaws hit the dusty ground.

Actually, it might have been a bigger deal than that. In the oldest copies of Matthew’s gospel that scholars have been able to examine, the number Jesus is reported to have said isn’t clear in the Greek language. We can’t tell for sure if he told Peter he should be prepared to forgive someone “seventy-seven times” or “seventy times seven” (that is, 490 times). Either way, that’s a big number. Imagine someone offending or hurting you, and you decide to forgive them for their fleeting moment of insensitivity or selfishness or intentional meanness. And a few days or weeks later they hurt you again and you forgive them a second time. Then sometime later, a third. Then a fourth. Then a tenth time. Then a twenty-fifth time. By now you’re probably losing track of how many times you’ve dug deep into your reservoir of grace and called on God’s Holy Spirit to strengthen you to forgive yet again. That would be true the fiftieth time, or the seventy-seventh time... or the 490th time.

And where did those numbers come from? Why did Peter ask about forgiving seven times, and why did Jesus respond with “seventy-seven” times (or more)? We have to go back to the Old Testament. Actually, this part of the Old Testament probably reflected a folklore tradition that was already ancient when it was used as the basis for part of the scriptures. We all know that the primordial genealogy in the book of Genesis was based on a prototypical man and woman given the names Adam and Eve. We know that they had two sons Cain and Abel. You may remember from Genesis Chapter 4 that sibling jealousy arose in Cain’s heart and he killed his brother. God’s punishment for that offense was to evict Cain from the family farm and force him to scrounge for a living. Cain panicked. “People will be out to get me because of what I did to my brother.” God assured him, “No, this will deter them: if anyone kills you, seven lives will be taken in revenge.”

But the story continues. Eventually Adam and Eve’s son Cain got a wife (though the Bible never explains how she came into existence). A few generations later Cain’s great-great-great-grandson was born. His name was Lamech. Apparently Lamech had some of his great-great-great-grandfather Cain in him, because one time when some guy picked a fight with Lamech and gave him a punch, Lamech killed the guy. Far from being remorseful, Lamech declared to his wives (yes, *wives*), “If people were going to pay with seven lives if they had killed great-great-great-grandpa Cain, they’re going to pay with seventy-seven lives if they kill me!” In other words, “...In the family of the undisciplined murderer [Lamech], vengeance [ran] rampant, uncontrolled, and without limits.”⁴ Not just seven lives to avenge a death, but seventy-seven lives! A blood feud without mercy or limit.

That story from the Hebrew scriptures would have come to mind when Jesus answered Peter, “No, not seven times... but seventy-seven times.” But Jesus turned the story upside-down: where Lamech

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, 65

vowed immeasurable retribution for an offense, Jesus urged innumerable efforts at mercy and forgiveness.

The point, of course, is that we should forgive with such generosity that we cannot track it.

In a beautiful passage in the thirty-first chapter of his book, the prophet Jeremiah revealed God's vision for a new way for people to relate to one another. It began with God – with God's infinite mercy and love. Indeed, God would model this infinite love and mercy, promising in Jeremiah 31:34 "I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken."

Did you hear? "Forgiving sins" and "no longer remembering wrongs" went hand-in-hand.

A seminary president named Martin Copenhaver has written, "In my experience, when someone says, 'I will forgive, but I will never forget,' it usually means: 'I will never forgive.'"

By never forgetting, we're choosing to hold onto the pain that we associate with the wrong done to us. Choosing not to forget an offense is like picking at a scab: though the injury has already begun to heal, we return to the scene of injury and voluntarily initiate the painful response yet again.

In the old comic strip "Kudzu", one of the recurring characters was an old-time Southern country preacher, a fellow with the name "the Reverend Will B. Dunn." In the strip depicted on today's bulletin cover, Rev. Dunn appears to be engaged in some marriage counseling. We can imagine that the wife and husband both have unloaded their cargo of complaints about each other to the good preacher. They probably recounted each one in extreme detail, so clear were the specifics from the husband and wife having flung them at each other over and over for months, even years.

The preacher's advice seems like a cartoonist's attempt simply to have fun with the English language. Reverend Dunn tells the couple, "Sometimes a good forgettery is more valuable than a good memory."⁵

Let me go back to that seminary president's thoughts on forgetting as a component of forgiving. Dr. Copenhaver wrote:

In his masterpiece *City of God* [written in the year 413 C.E.], Saint Augustine says that, when we are redeemed in the world to come, we will still remember our own wrongdoing, but in a different way than we do in this life. In this life, we cannot remember our own wrongdoing without being pained by it. In the world to come, we will be able to recall events without remembering the pain associated with them. There will be a kind of forgetfulness. To be redeemed, then, is in some way to be spared the pain that can accompany recollection....

...To forgive, something like forgetfulness is required. We are not expected to erase every memory of hurt or injustice from our cerebral "hard drives." Rather, we are to forgive so completely that it is as if we have forgotten.

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed that forgetting is the opposite of creating. In creating, you make something out of nothing. In forgetting, you make nothing out of something. He says that choosing to forget hurt or injustice suffered at the hands of another is like taking something and putting it behind your back – it's still there, if you were asked about it, you'd have to grant that it exists, but you don't look at it, it's not between you, but behind you.⁶

I admit it's pretty hard to imagine the expression "Fuhgeddaboutit!" coming from the lips of Jesus. But as hard as it can be, "forgetting" is a necessary component of being able to "for-give" – to give up to God--the hurts and injuries that are going to arise from our interactions with others. Jesus said that being generous in forgiveness is a distinctive characteristic of those who follow him. In being generous forgivers we are not stronger or better than other folks; rather, we realize that whatever we are called to forgive is minute compared to the forgiveness God has shown toward us in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus the Son.

Prayer: O God, help me to remember to forgive and, in so doing, to forget. Amen.

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⁵ Doug Marlette, "Kudzu," January 14, 2002, © Tribune Media Services, Inc.

⁶ From "Forgiving and Forgetting" by Martin B. Copenhaver, President of Andover Newton Theological School, in *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional*, October 18, 2016, United Church of Christ, dailydevotional@ucc.org