

# “Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for Another Chance*

First of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
February 21, 2021—Lent 1

## Psalm 130 Common English Bible

<sup>1</sup> I cry out to you from the depths, LORD—

<sup>2</sup> my Lord, listen to my voice!

Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

<sup>3</sup> If you kept track of sins, LORD—

my Lord, who would stand a chance?

<sup>4</sup> But forgiveness is with you—

that’s why you are honored.

<sup>5</sup> I hope, LORD.

My whole being hopes,

and I wait for God’s promise.

<sup>6</sup> My whole being waits for my Lord—

more than the night watch waits for morning;

yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

<sup>7</sup> Israel, wait for the LORD!

Because faithful love is with the LORD;

because great redemption is with our God!

<sup>8</sup> He is the one who will redeem Israel

from all its sin.

**Matthew 18:21-33 NIV** <sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> “At this the servant fell on his knees before [his master the king]. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master [the king] everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the [king] called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’”

You might not be able to tell just from looking around, but in the Christian church we have entered a new season called Lent. Maybe the only thing you know about Lent is that it means that the partying associated with Mardi Gras is over, even if you didn’t know that Mardi Gras exists because of the season of Lent. Maybe you’ve

heard that Lent is a period of time when some Christians “give up” something as an act of faith, even if the reason for giving up anything isn’t clear to you.

You might say that the Christian Church’s season of Lent suffers from having a bad press agent – we haven’t gotten Lent’s story out clearly enough. Here are four things to know about Lent.

First, Lent is a season intended for Christians to reflect and prepare their hearts for the celebration of Easter that awaits us at the end of Lent. That’s not a “spoiler alert” – we know that Easter is coming.

Second, Lent is forty days long... sort of. You see, the Sundays aren’t included in the forty-day count, so in reality Lent actually lasts forty-six days. But a forty-day period is quite biblical. We’re reminded of several Bible stories involving forty days such as:

- how long it rained when Noah was on the ark (Genesis 7:4);
- how long Moses was on Mt. Sinai (twice, in Exodus 24:18, 34:1-28);
- how long until God would punish the city of Nineveh, according to Jonah (Jonah 3:1-10);
- after he was baptized, how long Jesus retreated to the wilderness before he began his ministry (Matthew 4:2).

Third, Lent doesn’t come from the Bible. Jesus didn’t tell us to set aside a time called Lent. Lent was devised by the Christian Church in its early centuries<sup>1</sup> as an aid for believers to explore and deepen their faith.

Fourth, not every Christian denomination observes the season of Lent, and even in Christian traditions that do, individual Christians tend to decide if and how they will engage in Lenten practices such as periodic fasting, study, prayer, acts of charity.

During Lent here at Rocky River Presbyterian Church we offer a daily devotional booklet for your personal devotions; if you’d like one, let us know. And during our weekly worship broadcasts I’ll be offering a series of messages called “‘Don’t Give Up!’ – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This week’s installment is about “hope for another chance.”

Even if we don’t know where it came from, we all probably know the expression “Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone.” It comes from a story in the Gospel of John. A self-righteous mob was preparing to execute justice upon a woman who had committed adultery by stoning her to death. (By the way, in that ancient society there was no consequence for the man; just the woman.) Without defending what the woman had done, Jesus defended her right to forgiveness and another chance. So Jesus said to the crowd, “Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus spoke up for her. Through forgiveness he offered her another chance.

That is a reason for us to put our trust in God: it is in God’s nature to forgive, to give us another chance after we have messed up our lives, to give us a chance to make

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas V. Russo, “The Early History of Lent,” The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University © 2013 at <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/193181.pdf> accessed 2/10/2021

<sup>2</sup> John 8:7 Good News Translation

amends after our words or our actions have brought hurt to someone else. What's more, God's capacity for forgiveness far exceeds what we can imagine.

Earlier we heard from the Gospel of Matthew an exchange between Jesus and his disciple named Peter. Peter wanted to know how tolerant and forgiving a follower of Jesus could reasonably be expected to be. He asked Jesus, "If a friend offends or hurts me in some way, how many times should I be expected to forgive him?" Peter then ventured a number that he thought was exceedingly generous: "Up to seven times? Would that be sufficient, Jesus?"

Jesus responded, "No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Think about that. If someone did you wrong, you could remember two, three, four, maybe five, *maybe* seven times. But could you remember *ten* distinct instances of their misbehavior toward you? Two-dozen? Fifty? Seventy-seven? Of course not. Jesus was exaggerating to make the point. For a follower of Jesus, forgiveness means not keeping a count. Countless. Our capacity for forgiveness must be incalculable in its generosity and mercy. Jesus then told a parable describing the kingdom of God. The parable illustrated what it will be like when we adopt God's forgiving nature.

In the parable a king discovered that one of his servants had embezzled an astronomical amount of money, far beyond his ability to repay through working it off. When the king sentenced the servant and his family to debtors' prison, the servant begged – *begged!* – the king for leniency, vowing to figure out a way to repay the debt. The king "took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."<sup>3</sup>

The parable goes on, but right there at the beginning of the story Jesus made his point about the kingdom of God; he made his point about what life will be like when God's way becomes our way. Jesus asserted that forgiveness is in God's nature.<sup>4</sup> What's more, no matter how many or how great our sins, God's ability and willingness to forgive exceeds our capacity to offend or cheat or hurt or fail.

Forgiveness is God's nature. We heard that in the words from Psalm 130:

*If you kept track of sins, Lord – my Lord, who would stand a chance?*

*But forgiveness is with you – that's why you are honored.*<sup>5</sup>

God gives us another chance... seventy-seven other chances... countless new opportunities. We're encouraged to rely on God's power and mercy so we can offer forgiveness and another chance to those who have offended us. Forgiveness is a gift that has the power to erase seemingly immovable obstacles separating people. For instance,

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of brothers Rodney and Ian farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch.

Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:27 NIV

<sup>4</sup> See New International Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 216

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 130:3-4 Common English Bible

One morning there was a knock on Rodney's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. He said, "I'm looking for a few days' work. Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there I could help with?"

"Yes," said Rodney. "I do have a job for you. See that farm on the other side of that creek? That's my neighbor; in fact, it's my younger brother Ian. Last week there was a meadow between us, but Ian took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence – an 8-foot fence – so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

Rodney had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then Rodney left for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset when Rodney returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

Rodney's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge – a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, with handrails and all – and younger brother Ian was walking up to the far end of the bridge. He called out to Rodney, "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done."

The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. Rodney said to him, "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you."

The carpenter replied, "I'd love to stay on, but I have many more bridges to build."<sup>6</sup>

God's forgiveness is our bridge-builder, offering us another chance. Another chance to restore broken relationships with family members we've hurt, to restore broken relationships with friends we've turned our backs on, to recover our relationship with God that we had broken off in when we found ourselves in a pit of despair or in an angry fit of self-importance.

In the words and example of Jesus we see that God blesses us with hope for another chance. Because we love and are loved by Jesus, we know we can ask for forgiveness when we're sorry, when we repent of our hurtful, sinful words and actions. Jesus blesses us with the ability to offer forgiveness when others have hurt us, not just one time, or seven times, but seventy-seven times – an infinite reservoir of forgiveness and love.

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<sup>6</sup> Story adapted from unknown source