

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
September 17, 2023.**

**DIRECTED**

*<Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 103:1-13; Matthew 18:21-35>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

One of the things you'll eventually learn about me is that I prefer to enjoy each season in turn, without looking too much ahead toward what is coming or pining for what has already come and gone. My wife would probably be willing to tell you that I don't even really like to plan too much about Christmas until Thanksgiving is past, and that I bristle a little bit when I see Halloween decorations in the stores in August. But for as much as this is my usual habit, my mind can't help but to turn this morning to Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," and this line in particular from the ghost of Jacob Marley, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

Marley, of course, is referring to what he prioritized and how he lived his life, particularly in relationship to his clients, always valuing his own bottom line to anything or anyone else. And now he has appeared to Scrooge as a warning, and as a precursor to a lesson.

But what has stuck with me, particularly in this week and in prayerfully pondering our gospel reading, has been that first line of his: "I wear the chain I forged in life...". It's an immensely personal statement and confession, an awareness that perhaps only came to Jacob Marley in his death, but one which reflects an understanding of just how deeply our own lives are tied up in the lives and dealings we have with others. It's an awareness that our own well-being is tied up in living these lessons, and not just pondering them abstractly.

And for Simon Peter in this morning's gospel reading, that seems to be precisely where he is.

Following from last week's reading, we are mindful of the teachings Jesus has been giving the disciples in regards to the life of faith. We remember Jesus' words concerning the littlest and most vulnerable, the marginalized and overlooked, and the ways in which we are to seek community over division. And all of this sounds good and right. But Peter, now, makes it personal, taking the conversation from the abstract teaching to the practical living. You can almost hear the unspoken words in between the spoken. 'Lord, this all sounds great, but I have to ask: If someone keeps doing me wrong, how many times must I actually forgive? Is seven times enough?' Peter wants a specific answer, a set limit and threshold to work with, so that he can know that he's done what is required of him before he lives into what is intimated that he would rather do, which is be righteously angry at whoever has wronged him. 'Lord, I forgave seven times, but then on the eighth time I let him have it!'

No.

That's easy to think of, though. It's easy because it's so very human, so very us. But Jesus' response calls us, directs us toward anything but natural, predictable human response. Jesus

directs us instead toward *faithful* response, and his answer to Peter is “not seven, but seventy-seven” (or seventy times seven, depending on your translation).

In short, always and forever, every day in uncountable ways.

Because I think Jesus is more concerned with the chains we forge in life - chains for ourselves, chains for our community - and forgiveness is not just a nice thing to do, not just a Christian way to be, but is a power in and of itself for life. And Jesus is all about life, capital “L” Life, especially Life over death. Holding a grudge, refusing to forgive, living as one wronged, will ultimately lead us to death. It will be an unbreakable chain that tethers us to dismay and sullenness. It will drag us down. But forgiveness is a whole other ballgame.

But it’s not always easy, or straightforward. Take, for instance, the People of Israel. Newly released from bondage in Egypt, they have made their way toward the wilderness but now discover that Pharaoh and his armies are pursuing them. In an act of Divine Presence and guidance, God remains with the people in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Leading the people onward. Showing them, in an utterly visible way, that God is present with them. And creating separation between them and their pursuers. And when they come to the shores of the Red Sea, Moses strikes the water with his staff and the people of God cross safely on dry land, whereas the chariots and horses and army of Pharaoh are consumed by the waters. It should be a moment of triumphant victory and celebration, yes?

For the people of Israel who have lived so long in captivity, yes indeed. Their songs of praise and deliverance echo this. But there is a Mishnah commentary on this reading that I have become particularly drawn to of late. Briefly, the Mishnah is the wisdom and reflection of Jewish rabbis over the ages in regards to the Scriptures; it’s their discussion and interpretation, but carries more weight than just a group of people talking about their stories of faith. The Mishnah is also meant to inform and guide future readers and faithful people of God. And the Mishnah reading on this passage broadens the view on this scene to include the heavenly host of angels. They, too, begin to celebrate with the people of God who have just escaped and have been delivered safely through the waters to freedom. But as the angels begin to rejoice, God chastises them. While the people sing for joy at their deliverance and proclaim the might of God, the angels are demanded to be silent. According to the Mishnah, God declares, “How dare you sing for joy when my creatures are dying?” [Talmud, Megillah 10b, Sanhedrin 39b]

Because God cares about all of creation, all of humanity, whether we can comprehend that or not. That’s sometimes a radical statement in and of itself, but really, it shouldn’t surprise us. The God of creation loves all of creation, even when it’s wayward and fractious, even when the suffering is a result of choices and actions and yes, divine intervention. And the suffering of any is cause for lament. And as crazy as it sounds, I believe that the way to keep such suffering and lament from being our reality is to cultivate an attitude of forgiveness; forgiveness equips and enables us to endure. To faithfully endure in the face of difficulty and to do so with evidenced love and compassion.

And this, especially, is why forgiveness is so necessary, so critical, and according to Jesus, so never-ending. Because the forgiveness we show is not just something we give or bestow

to others, it is also the gift we give ourselves for life in this world. Just as God created us to be.

I like to think - and perhaps this is just me - but I like to think that God in the pillar of cloud and fire was not just protecting and guiding the people of Israel, but was also attempting to give all parties involved a chance to pause and think about what they were about. To make even a small decision that might lead toward reconciliation rather than force a choice between destruction for one side or another. We know from the story that it did not go that way, but I like to think that the possibility, however small, was there. But the Israelites were not in a position to forgive the generations of captivity and trauma (understandably), and the Egyptians were not in a position to forgive the way in which Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egypt. Their chains were forged, link by link, yard by yard.

How many times must I forgive the one who wrongs me? It's a technical question, but I also think it's not quite the right question. I think the more faithful question is, "what chain am I going to choose to forge?" Because forgiveness liberates and sets free. It redeems the relationship, and helps us sidestep the trap of living in grudges and hurt, in anger and violence.

And that, brothers and sisters, that is a very radical way to be. It is who we are directed to be. We are directed toward forgiveness because forgiveness heals a community. Not in a one-directional way, where someone is always the punching bag but lets the pattern continue; forgiveness cannot be given only from one point to another, one person to another. It is a gift received, and more so, it is a gift we receive from our selves. Forgiving the other shows them that another path is available, and it sets us free; to not forgive is to choose to hold on with a death-grip to that which has wounded us. And if we hold our wounds open too long, we will die.

The debt of the first slave in Jesus' parable is enormous; it can never be paid off. But when the king forgives the debt, the forgiven slave does not carry that forgiveness forward to those around him, and so ends up suffering all the more. Elie Wiesel spoke, long after the Holocaust, of his difficulty in forgiving those who were responsible for his experience, for what that led him to do and be in relationship with others. But he also confesses that he never gave up on the idea of forgiveness, or the need to practice it, daily, in our living and in our prayerful hearts. In 1985, returning to Berlin for the first time since the Holocaust, Wiesel reflected to those gathered, "I had never before considered that it could be as painful to be the children of those who ran the camps as to be the child of those who died in them." Recognizing such a dynamic is, even in the face of a complicated and nuanced situation, a difficult experience, the recognition that humanity is at stake, and forgiveness is a pathway we walk toward wholeness - for others, for our communities, and for ourselves.

Jesus wants us to live, to be an example of life and a new way, to show that, "yes, such a way of living is possible and realistic." That is why forgiveness is seventy-seven, or seventy times seven, or uncountable, ultimate, never-ending. Forgiveness is to be our living, so that we *can* live in the first place. This is our direction. Amen.