

**Romans 14:7-12**

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,*

*'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'*

*So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

**Matthew 18:21-35**

*Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'*

*'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

**This is the Word of the Lord...**

I didn't set out to make it a Lenten discipline, but at some point early in Lent I found myself on Facebook writing a reason why that day was the best day.

*"Session approved my continuing education trip to Iona (although at first, due to my bad handwriting, they thought it was Iowa)." #whytodayisthebestday*

My only rule was that it couldn't be sarcastic or put up for the sole purpose of trying to be funny (ie: the cat only puked two times instead of three #whytodayisthebestday). Sometimes they were big things, and sometimes they were small. It was a worthwhile practice as I found myself constantly re-framing things and always seeking a way to make that day the best day - no matter what happened in it.

“Got all the checks written for new roads, great schools, affordable health care, PBS and NPR, defense, Medicaid, helping other countries, and taking care of the pandas at the National Zoo.” #whytodayisthebestday

As far as I can tell, this hasn't changed the world one bit. Friends, way too young, continue to receive cancer diagnoses, and the world and national news is best labeled as 'what has made today scary and horrifying'. But I have noticed a change in me, and although I have slipped a bit into some old habits, in general I am approaching life, and life's ups and downs with a different attitude.

As the project went on, I found myself waking up in the morning already thinking about what was going to make that day the best day. That alone, made it an exercise worth doing.

“He is Risen!” #whytodayisthebestday

When we sat down as a worship team and looked at the Scriptures for today and the upcoming weeks we read about God's forgiveness, God's abundance, and God's salvation. Pastor Mark said, “Forgiveness, abundance, and salvation – why today is the best day.”

And so here we are.

We're picking up in the Gospel of Matthew about two thirds through the book. The disciples have long ago decided to follow, people have been fed, taught, and healed. It's after the Transfiguration on the mountainside and so things are getting a little more intense for everyone. For Jesus, time is running out.

Chapter 18 finds the disciples and Jesus immersed in a conversation about what it means to be in community. Who are we to be, what are we to be about? At the beginning of this chapter, they ask him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” They have been working hard, they have been faithful worship attenders (even on the Sunday after Christmas!), they have served on a few committees. They tithe.

But Jesus knew the faithful have a tendency towards thinking that perhaps they were better than others 'outside' their precious circle. He wanted them, the disciples, the church, to be a laboratory of sorts where important virtues were tried out, practiced, so we might be equipped to live them more fully out in the world. It's not about power or smarts Jesus said, at first. Become like a child (18:1-4). Then he told them not to put a stumbling block before anyone - they were to help one another. Be like the shepherd who went out after the one sheep. The sheep shouldn't have run off. But Jesus said we have to go after him. If one member of the church sins against you – get this – sins against you – you have to do something about it. You have to reconcile. You have to step forward, engage the issue, make a path for God to heal the breach conflict has opened up.<sup>1</sup>

*Then Peter came and said to him...*

“No sooner has Jesus outlined the process for repairing broken relationships in the church than Peter, as the spokesperson for the disciples, steps forward to ask for clarification.”<sup>ii</sup> Maybe Jesus had hit a nerve. Faces flashed before Peter – people he needed to forgive, people from whom he needed to ask forgiveness. And he blurted it out: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

Peter decided to be generous: “As many as seven times?”

Oh Peter... try seventy-seven times.

At first glance this text seems to say that our failure to forgive undoes God’s forgiveness. God takes back that which is given if we don’t give as God gives. But that, says theologian Miroslav Volf, is a much too literal reading of the text. Our inability to forgive might be a sign of a spiritual problem within ourselves – our own inability to see, understand, and live into God’s real forgiveness of us. If we can’t believe, can’t grasp that God would forgive us, transform us, despite all we have been, said, done, then of course we are going to have trouble forgiving someone else.

That is not to say that forgiveness is easy. Nor is it to say that forgiveness is the same as letting someone repeat hurtful patterns. Living in community with one another means more than that, it means reconciliation and forgiveness. And if the other party is not willing to reconcile, then you cannot be in community with them. This is especially true if you are emotionally, mentally, or physically unsafe. This is not forgive and forget, but sometimes we have to forgive and let go.

The Christian call to forgiveness is a call to community. And it is through prayer, through hard work, through the support of communities of people who value forgiveness, that we can do it. The communal element is so important. We rarely have the strength on our own – especially in a world that cries for vengeance – but Christian communities must be places where forgiveness lies at the core.

Forgiveness is so often about letting go of the little thing – the tone we read in an email, the comment we get defensive about, the slowness of the people in front of us at the grocery store when we’re in a hurry. How do we make forgiveness one of the practices at the center of our communities? Should we not have mercy on our brother and sisters, as God has mercy on us?

If we practice forgiveness in the little things, we will be ready to live forgiveness in the big things.

Ed Thomas, like many high school football coaches, was an institution in Parkersburg, Iowa, population 1900. He accepted the job in 1975 and built Applington-Parkersburg High into a small-school powerhouse, winning 82% of his games. He was named the NFL high school coach of the year in 2005. In May 2008 a tornado destroyed the town, leveling the school and 800 homes, including the Thomas.’ But the coach and his players led the rebuilding effort, digging graves for the eight dead, challenging the town to get ready for the fall home opener. They led the town back.

Mark Becker played for Thomas, a junior starter on the 2001 State Championship team. Their families had gone to church together for 30 years. Soon afterward, though, things began to change. His behavior became erratic. He would fly into a rage, hearing voices. He began to threaten his parents, which led to violence, which led to arrests, a few short stays in psychiatric institutions. He was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. On June 20, 2009, Mark was arrested for vandalizing a home and leading police on a high-speed chase. A couple of days later, the hospital released him. The next day, early, before school, Mark walked into the weight room, pulled a gun, and killed Ed Thomas, his beloved former coach.

A few hours later, Ed's son Aaron stood before a bank of cameras to thank the community for the outpouring of support. Then he said something amazing. He said, "We also want to make sure we express our concern and compassion for the Becker family - that people pray for them and take time to comfort them." And as the community gathered that week, as they mourned their beloved coach they also - in part because of his family's faithfulness - they gathered around the Becker's, around the family of the young man who had done this tragic thing.

Hundreds of people visited the Beckers that week. Many would come in and say, "Jan [Ed's widow], wanted me to give you a hug. She said to come see you, too." The day before Ed's funeral, everyone gathered for the visitation. But before anyone else came in, the Thomas' invited the Beckers to pray with them, privately, in the church. Ed Thomas's sons took over the team, and before the first practice, they gathered with Scott Becker, Mark's younger brother, a member of the team formerly coached by the man his brother shot.

Through those first football games, through a gut-wrenching trial, through the life sentence Mark received. "The grace and the mercy and compassion they have shown our family has given us the opportunity to stay in the community that we love so much. There's no way I could be here if we didn't have that kind of acceptance, through the love they have shown us."

It would have been easy for them to hold a grudge. It would have been easiest, most likely, to do nothing. But the Thomas' chose to lead their community towards healing, chose to reach out in love. Ed Thomas was, by all accounts, a remarkable human being. But faithfulness demands more. "It's not about how Ed died," Jan Thomas said, "it's about how we are called to live"<sup>iii</sup>

We are called to live as beloved children of God, receiving the grace, mercy, and forgiveness that God has given us, and also giving that same grace, mercy, and forgiveness to others in our community, in our church family, and maybe the hardest of all - to the people we interact with every day within the walls of our own home.

Forgiveness leads to reconciliation leads to genuine peace that passes all understanding... and that, will make today the best day.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The Reverend Christ Tuttle. "24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 11, 2011. The Well, Austin, Texas, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Long, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p 211.

<sup>iii</sup> "Heartland," on E:60, aired on ESPN Tuesday night, April 13. Accessed at:

<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/e60/news/story?id=4964740>