***Embracing the uncertain***

**Lenten Worship Series – Week 2**

***The Uncertainty of Forgiveness***

**March 8, 2020**

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| **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINE**S  Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. Sermon manuscripts are included as a *sample* and not to be preached verbatim. |

**Call to Worship**

1Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;  
2    Lord, hear my voice.  
Let your ears be attentive  
    to my cry for mercy.

3If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,  
    Lord, who could stand?  
4But with you there is forgiveness,  
    so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

5I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,  
    and in his word I put my hope.  
6I wait for the Lord  
    more than watchmen wait for the morning.

7Israel, put your hope in the Lord,  
    for with the Lord is unfailing love  
    and with him is full redemption.  
8He himself will redeem Israel  
    from all their sins.

*Psalm 130,* NIV

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| **SB#55 – Praise, my soul, the king of Heaven** | TB-406 – Praise, my soul | HTD2-T12 (3 vs.) |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#167 – Hail, Thou once despisèd Jesus** | TB-370 – Hyfrydol | HTD1-T14 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#451 – Would you be free from your burden of sin?**  **HC#71 – Power in the Blood** | TB-945 – Wonder-working power  HC-71 | No CD  HCD6-T11 |
| **SB#261 – Lord, the light of Your love is shining**  **HC#99 – Shine, Jesus, shine!** | TB-822 – Shine, Jesus, shine  HC-99 | No CD  HCD8-T19 |
| **SB#89 – O for a thousand tongues to sing**  **HC#161 – My Great Redeemer’s Praise** | TB-59 – Azmon  TB-75 – Grimsby  HC-161 | HTD3-T4 (4 vs.)  No CD  HCD15-T11 |
| **HC#248 – Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)** | HC-248 | HCD23-T18 |
| **SB#56 – Praise to the Lord, the Almighty**  **HC#251 – Praise to the Lord, the Almighty** | TB-735 – Lobe den Herren  HC-251 | HTD4-T11 (4 vs.)  HCD24-T11 |
| **SB#464 –I heard an old, old story**  **HC#255 – Victory in Jesus** | TB-908 – Victory in Jesus  HC-255 | HTD10-T17 (4 vs.)  HCD24-T15 |
| **HC#272 – Mighty to Save** | HC-272 | HCD26-T12 |
| **SB#49 – O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder**  **HC#274 – How Great Thou Art!** | TB488 – How great Thou art!  HC-274 | HTD1-T12 (4 vs.)  HCD26-T14 |

***The Uncertainty of Forgiveness***

**Leader:**

Forgiveness is a difficult task. There is never a guarantee that asking for it or granting it will be easy. We may choose to forgive; it will be impossible to forget. But we are called to forgive, nonetheless. In the end, we must believe that forgiveness is not optional in the Christian life. It is a calling of the highest standard, a sacred action prompted by a divine impulse. It is God who calls us to forgive, and it is God who enables us to forgive—for healing of the world and the healing of our souls.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, p. 32)

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| **Drama – 489 and Counting** |

**Choric Reading:**

**Reader 1:** It should be no surprise that one of the marks of Christian character is the capacity to forgive. It is part of the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But when it comes down to it, we can acknowledge how uncertain we feel about this whole subject of forgiveness.

**Reader 2:** Why should we forgive?

**Reader 3:** How can we forgive when it is so hard to do so?

**Reader 4:** What difference does forgiveness make, anyway?

**Reader 1:** Apparently, we are not alone in our wondering. Peter was wrestling with this question as well. And if anything, Jesus’ answer drew Peter into even more uncertainty.

**Reader 2:** 21Then 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?”

**Reader 3:** 22Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven).”

(Matthew 18:21-22, NIV)

**Reader 4:** Jesus’ answer about forgiveness blew Peter away—not because it suggested an astronomical number of times to forgive, but because it expanded Peter’s thinking about the nature and purpose of forgiveness. By saying we’re to forgive seventy times seven times, Jesus showed Peter that forgiveness is about our participation in the complete restoration of the entire world.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 23, 27)

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| **SB#781 – Our Father, who in Heaven art** | TB-70 – Fewster | HTD3-T13 (4 vs.) |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#750 – Father, I know that all my life** | TB-111 – Spohr | HTD10-T14 (3 vs.) |

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Announcements and Offering**

***Embracing the Uncertain***

**[Each week, *Embracing the Uncertain* is a time of silent prayer by the congregation. The leader should walk the congregation through the bullet points below.]**

**Leader:** Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you recalibrate your motivation for forgiveness.

* Begin by thanking God for all the ways you have been forgiven.
* Where is there uncertainty in the act of granting forgiveness?
* Where is there uncertainty in asking for or receiving forgiveness?
* Then, think about the steps you need to take today, and over upcoming days, to forgive and be forgiven by someone else.

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| **SB#595 – In this quiet moment**  **HC#173 – In This Quiet Moment** | TB-186 – same  HC-173 | No CD  HCD16-T13 |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **HC#58 – Praise You** | HC-58 | HCD4-T18 |
| **SB#409 – Change my heart, O God**  **HC#77 – Change My Heart, O God** | TB-584 – same  HC-77 | No CD  HCD6-T17 |
| **SB#736 – Tell me what to do to be pure**  **HC#102 – Whiter Than the Snow** | TB-932 – Whiter than the snow  HC-102 | HTD9-T19 (3 vs.)  HCD9-T12 |

**Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you for forgiving me of my sins. Empower me to follow the example you set for us in Jesus, that I might both forgive others and seek forgiveness. Help me to participate in your work to reconcile the world. Amen.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 33)

**Testimony of Forgiveness – [Choose someone from the congregation who can testify on this theme.]**

**Message – Forgiveness**

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| **HC#213 – In the Presence of Jehovah** | HC-213 | HCD20-T13 |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#201 – Thank You for the cross, Lord**  **HC#137 – Worthy Is the Lamb** | TB-947 – Worthy is the Lamb  HC-137 | No CD  HCD12-T17 |
| **SB#467 – If human hearts are often tender** | TB-17 – How much more | HTD1-T13 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#584 – Give me a heart that understands** | TB-70 – Fewster | HTD3-T13 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#770 – Lord, I come to Thee beseeching** | TB-391 – None of self | HTD12-T12 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#750 – Father, I know that all my life** | TB-111 – Spohr | HTD10-T14 (3 vs.) |
| **HC#58 – Praise You** | HC-58 | HCD4-T18 |
| **SB#601 – Lord, I come to You**  **HC#66 – The Power of Your Love** | TB-868 – The power of Your love  HC-66 | No CD  HCD5-T16 |
| **SB#409 – Change my heart, O God**  **HC#77 – Change My Heart, O God** | TB-584 – same  HC-77 | No CD  HCD6-T17 |
| **SB#769 – Jesus, see me at Thy feet**  **HC#98 – Nothing But Thy Blood** | TB-289 – Nothing but Thy blood  HC-98 | HTD11-T7 (4 vs.)  HCD8-T18 |
| **SB#736 – Tell me what to do to be pure**  **HC#102 – Whiter Than the Snow** | TB-932 – Whiter than the snow  HC-102 | HTD9-T19 (3 vs.)  HCD9-T12 |
| **HC#123 – Shine on Us** | HC-123 | HCD11-T13 |
| **SB#595 – In this quiet moment**  **HC#173 – In This Quiet Moment** | TB-186 – same  HC-173 | No CD  HCD16-T13 |
| **HC#205 – Closer Still** | HC-205 | HCD19-T15 |
| **SB#699 – Every promise we can make**  **HC#207 – Grace alone** | TB-640 – Grace alone  HC-207 | No CD  HCD19-T17 |
| **SB#376 – King of kings, majesty**  **HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty** | TB-722 – same  HC-219 | No CD  HCD20-T19 |

**Benediction:**

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

(Hebrews 13:20-21, NIV)

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| **SB#89 – O for a thousand tongues to sing**  **HC#161 – My Great Redeemer’s Praise** | TB-59 – Azmon  TB-75 – Grimsby  HC-161 | HTD3-T4 (4 vs.)  No CD  HCD15-T11 |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#201 – Thank You for the cross, Lord**  **HC#137 – Worthy Is the Lamb** | TB-947 – Worthy is the Lamb  HC-137 | No CD  HCD12-T17 |
| **SB#219 – God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus** | TB-570 – Because He lives | HTD12-T2 (3 vs.) |

**Alternative Benediction:**

Father, we are assured in Your Word that “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.” But if we forgive others when they sin against us, then you will forgive us as well. For in the same way we judge others, we will be judged, and with the measure we use, it will be measured to us. So, Father, right now I release into your hands those who have done me wrong. I open the door of the debtors’ prison I have held them in, and I set them free. And I ask in Jesus’ name, that you will set me free from the torment of bitterness and unforgiveness. O God, help me to walk away in freedom and to never look back. Amen.

(*NIV Worship Bible*, p. 1320)

DeVega, Magrey R. *Embracing the Uncertain: a Lenten Study for Unsteady Times*. Abingdon Press, 2017.

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| **Lent 2020 – Week #2** | |
| **DRAMA**  **489 and Counting**  **By Martyn Scott Thomas**  © Copyright 2009 by Martyn Scott Thomas. All rights reserved. Used by permission. | |
| **Topic:** | Grace, Forgiveness |
| **Scripture:** | Matthew 18:21-35 |
| **Synopsis:** | A man calculates precisely how many times he needs to forgive his neighbor. |
| **Characters:** | Arnie Carmichael – a somewhat forgiving man.  Penny Carmichael – his more than forgiving wife. |
| **Props/Costumes:** | Casual dress, possibly bathrobes, for Arnie and Penny. Two coffee mugs, two folded pieces of paper and a pencil. |
| **Setting:** | In front of a window in the Carmichael’s house. |
| **Running time:** | 5 minutes |

[*Arnie is looking out the window, drinking a cup of coffee.*]

**Arnie:** [*to Penny*] Would you look at that sky – not a cloud in sight. What a beautiful day!

**Penny:** [*approaches and stands next to Arnie*] I love sunny Saturday mornings. Nothing to do but enjoy the start of the day with a nice cup of coffee.

**Arnie:** And spy on the neighbors. [*pointing*] There’s old Mabel Hanratty sneaking a cigarette on her back porch. She doesn’t think Hank knows what she’s doing, but he does. He just waits for her to go outside, then he heads to the garage to puff on one of his cigars. Those two are definitely made for each other.

**Penny:** [*getting in on the act, pointing*] And there’s little Stevie Burrows grabbing the Johnson’s newspaper again. He always takes the sports section then puts the rest of it in the Townsend’s mailbox. Weird little kid.

**Arnie:** Uh-oh. Here comes Stan walking that little mutt of his. I can’t tell you how many times he’s let that rodent do his business in our yard without cleaning it up.

**Penny:** And yet, you never say anything to him. I guess all that preaching on forgiveness at church is really having an effect on you.

**Arnie:** Oh, I’ve been listening all right.

**Penny:** [*as if speaking to Stan*] Come on, Stan, keep walking. You can make it to the Sweeny’s yard.

**Arnie:** [*urging him on*] Just a few more steps.

**Penny:** [*disappointed*] Ooh and there’s the crouch. So close, he almost made it. I’ll go get the shovel for you.

**Arnie:** No, I’ll get it in a minute. [*pulls a piece of paper and a pencil out of his pocket*]

**Penny:** What’s that?

**Arnie:** [*hiding the paper*] Nothing.

**Penny:** [*reaching for the paper*] Come on, let me see it.

**Arnie:** [*pulling the paper away*] No, it’s just some notes I’m keeping.

**Penny:** [*joking*] Of what, how many times Lucky squats in our yard?

**Arnie:** [*looks away without answering*]

**Penny:** Please tell me you’re not keeping track.

**Arnie:** Well, would you rather have me keep a list or lie to you?

**Penny:** [*sternly*] Arnold Carmichael, let me see that piece of paper, right now!

**Arnie:** [*handing the paper to Penny, speaking to himself*] I should have lied.

**Penny:** [*taking the paper and reading*] Stan and Lucky, Jeff Sweeny, Mabel Hanratty, [*pausing, then reading slowly*] Penny? You have me on your list? And what are all these check marks?

**Arnie:** Okay, it’s not as bad as it seems. You only have 57 check marks. Everybody else has much more.

**Penny:** [*waving list*] What does this mean, Arnie? What are you keeping track of?

**Arnie:** I’m keeping track of all the wrongs people do to me.

**Penny:** And I have 57? Name them, Arnie. I want you to name them! Now!

**Arnie:** Come on, Penny. It’s not that bad. [*pointing to paper*] Look at Stan and Lucky. With today’s indiscretion, they’re up to [*counting marks*] 489.

**Penny:** [*in amazement*] 489? You’ve counted that dog doing his business on our lawn 489 times?

**Arnie:** That’s right, over the last three years I’ve counted 489 times. And one more time and I’m going to let them have it.

**Penny:** What are you talking about?

**Arnie:** One more time is 490 and then I don’t have to forgive them anymore.

**Penny:** I don’t understand.

**Arnie:** Now who hasn’t been paying attention in church? Jesus told us to forgive our neighbor 7 times 70 times. That’s 490 in my book, so one more time and I’m letting them have it.

**Penny:** I can’t believe this is happening.

**Arnie:** I know, when I first read that passage, I thought there was no way anyone would ever reach 490. I mean, then you’d have to always forgive everybody. But then, I started keeping my list and Stan and Lucky are the first ones to hit the magic number.

**Penny:** You are not my husband.

**Arnie:** And Jeff is getting pretty close. He’s up to 398.

**Penny:** What has Jeff done 398 times?

**Arnie:** Whenever he mows his lawn, he always leaves that little bit in “No Man’s land” between our houses because he knows I’ll get it, which I do. But, what he doesn’t know is that I’ve checked the survey and that’s actually his property.

**Penny:** So you’re going to stop mowing a four foot patch of grass?

**Arnie:** Not yet. 92 more times and then I’ll have the last laugh.

**Penny:** [*to herself*] I wouldn’t be too sure of that. [*changing the subject*] So what about my 57 check marks?

**Arnie:** Oh, don’t worry, my dear. You still have quite a ways to go before I stop forgiving you.

**Penny:** Oh, good. Arnie, I think you’re missing the point of that scripture. I don’t think Jesus wants us to keep track. I think he just wants us to forgive, no matter what.

**Arnie:** Then why did he give us a number?

**Penny:** Because he figured most rational people would give up counting before they even got close to 490.

**Arnie:** [*proudly*] Well, I guess I’m not a rational person then, am I?

**Penny:** You said it, not me. Now, give me that list before you get us in trouble with the neighbors.

**Arnie:** [*protesting*] But, Penny.

**Penny:** Arnie, give me the paper now!

**Arnie:** [*relenting, hands paper to Penny*] Okay, but I know that Stan and Lucky are out of chances.

**Penny:** You will do nothing to that man and his dog. Do you understand me?

**Arnie:** [*sheepishly*] Yes, dear.

**Penny:** Thank you. [*gives him a kiss on the cheek*] So, how would you like some pancakes for breakfast? [*exits*]

**Arnie:** Sounds great. [*watches her leave, then pulls another piece of paper out of his pocket and makes a mark on it*] Penny, 58.

**[*Blackout*]**

***Embracing the Uncertain***

**Lenten Sermon – Week 2**

***Forgiveness***

**March 8, 2020**

by Rev. Magrey deVega

[Based on *Embracing the Uncertain*, by Magrey R. deVega

Chapter 2: *Peter and the Uncertainty of Forgiveness*]

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:21-35

One of the reasons Peter is one of the most popular characters in the entire gospel is that he is so relatable. There’s something about Peter that most of us can identify with. In other words, Peter is the only one of the 12 disciples to say what the rest of us are thinking, but no one else wants to say. He’s the one that does the things that we would do if we were in his situation that no one else would want to do. So when it comes to what is perhaps one of Jesus’ most controversial teachings—the need to forgive people—Peter pretty much says what we would say in that situation.

He comes to Jesus at the opening of this scripture passage (Matthew 18:21) wondering how many times he had to forgive someone. We don’t know who that person is that wronged Peter, but clearly it’s at the forefront of his mind. He’s obviously familiar with an old Mosaic law that said you only have to forgive someone of their offense to you three times—sort of an ancient “three strikes and you’re out” rule.

So he asks, “Jesus, how many times do I have to forgive this person?” You’ve got to love Peter because he says, “What if I forgive that person *seven* times?” In other words, he says, “If I not only forgive that person three times—which is really only technically all I have to forgive that person—wouldn’t it be impressive if I doubled the times and add one more for good measure? I bet I’d be guaranteed sainthood or something! How many times do I need to forgive this guy who wronged me? Seven times?”

You’ve got to love that question, because Peter’s wrestling the same way you and I would wrestle over this very difficult teaching, when someone has wronged you or you’ve wronged someone else. I would venture a guess that the same applies to just about everyone else in the room today. How many times do we really have to forgive them?

Jesus recognizes in Peter’s question the same thing that he recognizes in each of us. The question is much deeper than just the number of times we have to forgive. The issue is much broader than the mechanics of forgiving: how to forgive; how often to forgive; how I should feel when I forgive. For Jesus it’s always a question of the heart; a question of one’s motivation. For Jesus, the central idea is not *how* to forgive or *how many times* to forgive, but why we should forgive. Jesus is much more interested in answering the motivation because all of us wrestle with this.

In 1882, a New York businessman named Joseph Richardson owned a very unique piece of property in Manhattan on Lexington Ave. It was a very narrow strip of land right up against the sidewalk, and the dimensions for this piece of property were: 5 feet wide by 104 feet long. Right next to Richardson’s property was a much larger and more suitable and buildable property owned by a man named Hyman Sarner. Mr. Sarner had his sights set on what he wanted to do with that city block. He wanted to develop a huge multi-story apartment complex. He wanted the windows to have a glorious view of Lexington Ave. The one thing that stood in the way of that dream complex was Mr. Richardson’s 5’ x 104’ property.

Mr. Sarner went to Mr. Richardson and said, “I can’t imagine you would do anything with this property. Can I buy it from you for $1,000.00?” (Remember, this was 1882!) Richardson responded, “You’ve got to be kidding—go take a hike! I’m not going to sell it to you for less than $5,000.00.” The argument went back and forth between the two men, with each man accusing the other of things. Richardson accused Sarner of being a “tight-wad” and slammed the door in Sarner’s face and walked away.

Mr. Sarner assumed that Mr. Richardson’s property would remain vacant and unbuildable, so he went ahead and built his dream apartment complex with views overlooking Lexington Ave. But when Mr. Richardson saw the finished building, he resolved to block the view. He did a little building project of his own so that no one would be able to enjoy the view over his Lexington lot. 70-year-old Joseph Richardson built a house 5 feet wide and 104 feet long, and 4 stories high with two suites on each floor. Upon completion of that house, Richardson and his wife moved into one of the suites.

[PICTURES of the narrow building]

(<https://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com/2012/12/06/the-story-of-the-upper-east-side-spite-house/>)

About the house:

* Only one person could use the stairway at a time (up or down)
* The largest dining room table in any suite was 18 inches wide
* The stoves were the smallest stoves ever made—custom built for this home
* A newspaper reporter came to report on it and he was of such girth that he wound up getting stuck in one of the hallways! He cried for help and two of the tenants came running to help and couldn’t get him out. The only way he could wedge himself free was to take his clothes off down to his underwear and he was finally able to get out of the house
* This building was nicknamed, “The Spite House”

Richardson spent the last 14 years of his life in that narrow residence. It was a symbol of the narrowness of his mind and the narrowness of his heart. The Spite House was torn down in 1915, but the Spite House is still standing. In fact, the Spite House continues to receive residents and visitors all the time. You and I both have probably spent a couple of nights in that Spite House over the course of our lifetimes. The Spite House exists within our own hearts and lives, and I would venture to say that there’s a part of each one of us that spends time in that Spite House year-round.

This is one of those things Jesus said that we wish he’d never said, when he called us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to forgive one another as we’ve been forgiven. Wouldn’t life be so much easier if we could do that whole “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” thing?

The truth of the matter is that forgiveness is a hallmark of the Christian faith, but many other world religions claim forgiveness as one of its central teachings. The difference here, of course, is that for Christianity, we believe that it was Jesus himself that not only taught this to his followers, but embodied it; that practiced it in his example. On his last dying hours hanging on the cross he looked into the faces of those tormentors—the ones with such hatred and vitriol in their eyes for him—and he dared to say the words that none of us could imagine saying: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). He expects us to do the same.

Peter speaks on our behalf here (Matthew 18:21). He is befuddled by the whole idea of forgiveness, because Jesus dares to say to him: It’s not about how many times you forgive; it’s not about the mechanics; it’s not about the “to-do” list in terms of seeking forgiveness from someone else. It’s all a matter of the heart. It’s all about the “why” of forgiveness. Because for Jesus it was less about *how* to forgive, but *why* to forgive and how we might change the way we see the other person.

When William Temple was the archbishop of Canterbury he said, “The only way that a Christian can get rid of his enemies is to love them into becoming his friends.” That is only possible if we are willing to take a risk and look beyond the obvious hurts and offences and try to see in our enemies the faces of potential friends. Wouldn’t that be a helpful thing to practice today? How much different would our world, our culture, and our nation be if we started to try to find in the faces of our ideological and political enemies the faces of potential friends?

One of the civil rights marchers from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, who was beaten as a result of his efforts, said that the only way he was able to make it through that experience with his faith in humanity intact and his hopes still alive, was to be able to look into the vitriol and hatred of those tormentors and simply say in his mind about that person, “There is a child of God who has simply forgotten who he is.”

Forgiveness is about remembering who you are. Forgiveness is about remembering who that other person is. Forgiveness is remembering that the two of you have a lot in common—that you are both children of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the wonderful spiritual leader of South Africa, once gave an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, addressing the very question of why we should forgive. He gave a very candid real account of why forgiveness is hard for him, autobiographically.

He began by sharing vivid memories of his own childhood father who abused his mother. He said, “I can still recall the smell of alcohol. I can see the fear in my mother’s eyes and feel the hopeless despair as we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. I would not wish that experience on anyone—especially not a child.”

As a result, Tutu has spent a lifetime trying to reconcile those haunting memories of his father’s abuse with the task that Jesus has given him and all of us of forgiving him. He is learning, he is spending his lifetime trying to figure out how to forgive his now-deceased father of his atrocities, acknowledging quite bluntly that it is really hard to do that. He says, “When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he himself was in pain. Spiritually, I know that my faith tells me that my father deserves to be forgiven just as God has forgiven each one of us. But the traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. And even years later, they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.”

You know the idea of forgiving and forgetting? Forget it. It’s impossible. Our brains are not hard drives that you can erase, delete or wipe out. God gave us these brains to be mental storage banks and those memories live on. What’s so hard about forgiveness is figuring out a way to have those memories still intact, but that their pain abates over time. It’s hard to do.

Forgetting does not precede the decision to forgive. In fact, remembering is a key part of the process. Remembering simply affords us the opportunity to make the choice, over and over, to relinquish the right to revenge, to participate in our healing, and to participate in God’s healing of the world.

There is uncertainty in forgiveness. You cannot guarantee that you will not be hurt again. You cannot guarantee that the other person will forgive you if you ask. But in spite of this you can be free from the imprisonment. And you can do it today. It does not even depend upon the participation of the other person.

And there is power in modeling. Like a good parable that makes us struggle and wonder at its seemingly simultaneous simplicity and complexity, seeing others forgive has this incredible power of intrigue and inspire and trouble us. I remember the news story back in 2006 of a school shooting that took place in a tiny Amish town in Pennsylvania; ten little girls tied up and shot in a one-room schoolhouse, five of them fatally, others sustaining life-long, debilitating injuries. The shooter was not Amish, but was known to the community as the local milkman. The story made national headlines because of the acts of forgiveness and compassion that followed the tragedy; families who had just buried their daughters coming to the funeral of the shooter (who had turned his gun on himself), forming a human wall to keep away the press, embracing the man’s widow and her three young children, and donating money to support them.

This does not mean these admirable people did this easily, nor that their lives did not continue to be impacted by the trauma. Many sought therapy. I read an [**NPR story**](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14900930) featuring an interview one of those counselors, a member of the community who had himself lost a child years before, and whose marriage-saving experience with counseling led him to that profession. He said: “What I found out in my own experience if you bring what little pieces you have left to God, [God] somehow helps you make good out of it. And I see that happening in this school shooting as well. One just, simple thing that the whole world got to see was this simple message of forgiveness.”

Ten years after that school shooting, reporters revisited the town, marveling at how the community reached out to befriend the shooter’s parents, and how that mother, in turn, cared for the children who survived. In an interview for [one of those articles](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/10/01/10-years-ago-her-son-killed-amish-children-their-families-immediately-accepted-her-into-their-lives/?utm_term=.d5befdb67b5f), Steven Nolt, a professor of Amish studies at Elizabethtown College, said that “for most people, forgiveness and acceptance come at the end of a long emotional process. But the Amish forgive first and then every day work through the emotions of it.” This [is called] “decisional forgiveness.”

What a powerful concept. It does not absolve one from responsibility for doing the challenging emotional work, but it helps one step out of the door of the prison and onto the path of healing, allowing God to come alongside and assist with that healing part.

One of the most amazing examples of forgiveness in the Bible is the story of Joseph (Genesis). If anybody had full right to seek revenge on people that had hurt him, it was Joseph. When he was just a child he was a victim of physical abuse himself by brothers who had tortured him, beaten him and left him for dead. They threw him in a pit, sold him off to slavery and kicked him out of the family—all because they were jealous of him. But at the end of the book of Genesis, the end of the story of Joseph’s life, he is about 30 years old, and who comes into Pharaoh’s palace where Joseph is second-in-command? Those brothers of his. If there was ever any valid reason for anybody to exact revenge on a person’s life, Joseph could have very easily gotten back at them. But Joseph didn’t. And seeing his brothers walk into the palace that day had to be the equivalent of ripping a bandage off old wounds.

How do you forgive when the trauma of the memory still lingers on? Why in the world would Desmond Tutu, Joseph and countless others even think about forgiving someone who has hurt them? Desmond Tutu provided an answer to that in that very same interview. He said, “Why would I do such a thing? Why would I forgive my father? I know it is the only way to heal the pain in my boyhood heart.

“Forgiveness is not dependent on the action of others. Yes, it is certainly easier to offer forgiveness when the perpetrator offers remorse and offers some sort of reparation or restitution. Then you can feel as if you have been paid back in some way. You can say, ‘I am willing to forgive you for stealing my pen. After you give me my pen back I shall forgive you.’ This is the most familiar pattern of forgiveness. We don’t forgive to help the other person. We don’t forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves. Forgiveness is the best form of self-interest.”

We’re called to forgive because forgiveness brings healing. Not just in the other person, not just in your relationship with that other person, but forgiveness brings healing for your own heart, within your own soul. Tutu is right—forgiveness is the best, most holy form of self-interest. You forgive because of what it does to *you*. Forgiving someone is not a sign of weakness, or that you allow that person to continue harming you, or that you will continue that vicious mutual cycle of self-destruction. Forgiveness simply means that you will stop destroying each other, and it begins a path toward healing. Forgiveness is the best form of self-interest.

What does Desmond Tutu say are the most difficult words to say? They are the words that seek and offer forgiveness. This is what he says are the three hardest words to say: “There are times when all of us have been selfish, thoughtless or cruel, but no act is unforgiveable and no person is beyond redemption. Yet is not easy to admit one’s wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. I AM SORRY are perhaps the hardest words to say. We can come up with all manner of justifications to excuse what we’ve done. When we are willing to let down our defenses and look honestly at our actions we find that there is a great freedom in asking for forgiveness and great strength in admitting we are wrong. It is how we free ourselves from our past errors and it’s how we are able to move forward into a future unfettered by the mistakes we have made.”

A pastor once said that the three most glorious statements to hear in your life are: 1) I am sorry. 2) I forgive you. 3) Supper is ready.

It’s hard to say them (the first two), but it’s good to hear and say them. On this Lenten journey, there is One person who made forgiveness possible by his own actions. Lent is about pointing us toward the cross. It is in the cross that we have not only been forgiven of our sins; we have been given the dramatic and enduring example of a Jesus who dared to forgive those who were hurting him so that we could have the example to do the same. By giving his own body and his own blood, and our participation in that body and blood, we can do the same for others. Let us live into that example seek forgiveness and to forgive other people and to follow Jesus all the way to the foot of the cross.

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