

Community-Developed

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Church: Bethel Mennonite Church Adult Education Series
Date: 2015

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Forgiveness and Forbearance **A 4-Session Adult Education Series**

Session One – Opening a Can of Worms

1. Never-ending Conversations

Each of us is involved in life-long never-ending conversations with ourselves, with others about things that matter - life, faith, relationships, experiences and hopes. The regular conversation partners are:
experience, tradition, reason and Scripture.

The starting points vary - sometimes its a passage and we bring our experience to it; other times, we begin with an experience, our tradition or reason and engage Scripture later.

In these four sessions, we will start on our side of the question, real situations, real complications and bring Scriptural light to bear on them.

Being at such a conversation table is engaging and self-disclosing; we get drawn, cannot stay at arms-length, remote, in the abstract.

I'm very glad that you've come and hope that everyone will feel comfortable and willing to get involved in the topic. The conversations may continue well beyond this month.

2. A word or two about myself and the topic

Why "Can of Worms"? Came to me during my reading and drafting; suggests the topic is complicated, multi-layered

inter-twined with experiences, memories, upbringing,
tradition and Scripture.

On the one hand, I have narrowed the topic, to person-to-person forgiveness, and simply assume God's forgiveness. We will not do much with that, but neither will we exclude it or ignore it.

On the other hand I have expanded the topic to include forbearance; separating this lesser known term and giving it considerable attention. It gets attention in Scripture, but for many of us, forbearance does not rank as a critical issue.

The term is used rarely but what it's about pops up repeatedly. We will work at untangling forgiveness and forbearance in session three. They are both full members in our can of worms.

Topic of forgiveness is more complicated also because it used to be the privileged domain of church and theology, has become part of research and study in the field of mental health, social psychology and education.

It has become part of life and relationships in a broader sense. We can learn from these approaches; they enrich our understanding and practice of forgiveness.

Robert Enright 1985

This happened quite recently, just 30 years ago, at the U of Wisconsin, with the pioneering work of Dr. Robert Enright, educational psychologist - The Forgiveness Project. TIME called him "the forgiveness pioneer." (1985)

Enright Forgiveness Inventory - The measurement tool of choice in forgiveness research

Marina Cantacuzino 2004 England

The Forgiveness Project 2004

The F-Word Project display shown in 350 places

"rehabilitative story-telling"

Marina Cantacuzino's background is journalism and in 2003 — in the lead up to the Iraq War - she started collecting personal stories of atrocity and terrorism which drew a line under the dogma of vengeance. The stories formed a body of work in the celebrated F Word exhibition and led to Marina founding The Forgiveness Project, a UK based not-for-profit unaffiliated to any religious and political group. The Forgiveness Project explores forgiveness and reconciliation through individual real-life stories, and promotes alternatives to violence and revenge.

Lewis Smedes

Ethicist at Fuller Seminary, The Art of Forgiving,

Forgiveness: the power to change the past, 1983, CT

Forgive and Forget

The Art of Forgiving, 1996

David Augsburg

The Freedom of Forgiveness 1988 (first 70 x 7)

Helping People Forgive, 1996

The can of worms will come alive as we talk about forgiveness; worms of memory will begin to stir and come to the surface for air. Some of these memories may be burdensome and painful, while others may be comforting and healing.

For me work on this topic is part of a larger picture of what's going on in my life at this stage; as it may well be for some of you as well. What I mean is this...rethinking, revisiting,

One of the things many men and women do in the last third of their lives is recall various things from the past and revisit them, reconsider them in the light of experience so far and in the light of our faith as a journey, not a destination that we had arrived at and everything remained constant and static since.

Over the years each of us has developed certainties about issues; but life throws us a curve and we feel compelled to revisit our certainties and possibly revise them. May be unsettling for some, but a relief for others.

We poke around in the garden of our memories, sometimes we decide to pursue a certain thought or topic, at other times a chance conversation, a profound experience, in worship, by ourselves, at a funeral or a chance encounter with someone we had not seen for decades - anyway it happened and we sensed that emotions were attached to a relationship that had been inactive, more or less. We go home and it's on our mind. We think further about it, we fuss with it, and we realize that our little can of worms has become active.

This has been called exploring the "archives of the heart" which are our private heritage centres; in which some of the files have been sealed for a long time.

I have revisited many questions in recent years,

- upbringing, family, church, community
- share memories with siblings and find our memories are different
- about how I've understood the Bible, end-times, Revelation
- even conversion
- BCMHS conference in 2010 with David Ewert
- as I've aged, I've revisited the meaning of aging
- have revisited forgiveness; "I used to think this, but now I..."

"Openness to change when warranted, is part of the journey of faith." Peter Enns

3. Let's do a word association with "forgiveness":

guilt	atone	resentment
hope	revenge	apology
anger	fear	unfair
justice	change	tears
joy	questions	doubt
finally its better	complicated	involved
suspicion	scary	getting off easy
ideas of God	acceptance	moving on
fear	a gift	scar

Forgiveness talk is counter-cultural

we are involved in something subversive here, in this series
-it's counter-cultural, why?

our social context/culture is not pro-forgiveness
-it's an uphill battle, counter cultural and existentially difficult
-but it's on the radar, Googling, 51 million hits, 4.7 hits

The *default setting* of our culture - socially, politically and personally - the first option is something else than forgiveness.

Media thirst for retribution... paying, justice for wrongs done.

What's *trending* now-a-days is
-striking back rather than forgiving,
-getting revenge rather than forgiving,
-following the old math of "an eye for an eye"
recipricocity ethics, getting even

What's trending in our culture is
retributive justice - proportionate punishment
rather than restorative justice.

When someone declares "justice will be done," when a person on the fringe or from a minority group calls for justice, they usually mean revenge and getting even, someone's gonna' pay, don't they?

pain experiences = pain administered
assume retaliation works
violence on one side calls for violence on the other
wrongs made right when pain administered to balance offense

satisfaction theory of atonement

For us to consider forgiveness as an option is countercultural;
considering an alternative to that which seems
to come naturally to the majority of people.

George Shillington wrote, "Forgiveness is so unnatural."

When an individual or a group of people chooses to forgive it comes as a surprise to many. This reaction of surprise led one forgiving person to ask the question, "*Why is everybody all surprised?*"

Some of you may remember the context (*Amish Grace*) of that question, published less than a decade ago. (More on this later.)

When we gather for worship, we are involved in a subversive,
counter-cultural activity.

Why? Because we confess Jesus as Lord.

If we seriously consider the words of Paul,

"You also must forgive" - we are going against popular opinion.

We are professing that what our culture sees as the only way
is not the only way, and not even the preferred way.

We are professing: there are alternatives available;
that's what saying Jesus is Lord and Saviour boils down to.

In worship we cultivate an alternative imagination, over time,
an alternative mind-set -

a set of convictions that society's *default setting* on forgiveness can be overridden.

We learn to practice non-conformity,

Exactly what Paul is saying in Col 3:13, "You also must forgive."

We are encouraged to learn the practice of forgiveness
even though it's not on society's agenda,
it is on the church's agenda (or isn't it?)

5. Forgiveness in Church and in life
(including "person to person" forgiveness)

What's the status of forgiveness in our lives, churches, denomination?

Do you think about forgiveness a lot?

Do you ask for forgiveness daily?
-other than in the Lord's Prayer?

-if yes, why? if not, why not?

Does forgiveness have high priority in church? (Scale of 1-5)

If so, how does it come to expression in prayers, hymns, confessions, sermons on forgiveness?

Do pastoral prayers include pleas for forgiveness? Did they earlier?

What is your favourite story on forgiveness in the Bible?

What is your favourite story on forgiveness outside the Bible?

What are your current questions about forgiveness?

Being in a worship service, what notions about God are communicated?

Jonathan Edwards' view of God (1741): "Sinners in the hands of an angry God"

"They are like worms that crawl on the earth and are easily crushed underfoot; they are hanging as by a slender thread that is easily singed or cut. The glittering sword of justice is whetted and is brandished over their heads. The flames of the fiery pit below them rage and glow, hell's gaping mouth is ready to swallow them, the devils like hungry lions are straining to get at their prey, the arrows of death are poised at them."

Edwards reminds them that unless they experience a "great change of heart by the power of the spirit of God" and unless they are made "new creatures" they are *still sinners in the hands of an angry God*, standing on the slippery slope of disaster, at any moment apt to be "swallowed up in everlasting destruction."

6. Startling words: two prayers, a command and a recent question

"Father, forgive them
for they do not know what they are doing" - Jesus Luke 23:34

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them" - Stephen - Acts 7:60

"as the Lord has forgiven you, you also must forgive" - Paul - Col 3:13

"Why is everybody all surprised? It's just standard Christian forgiveness; it's what everybody should be doing."(2006)

Eight years ago tragedy hit an Amish community and school in Nickel Mines, PA. Mr. Roberts entered the school and shot five students dead, injured others and then killed himself. Unbelievable. Horrendous. And surprising. Very soon the families that lost children declared they forgave the man and extended grace and support to the family of the man who had done the dastardly deed.

How could they do that? How could forgiveness be expressed so soon and so consistently?

The tragedy was written up and analyzed shortly afterward. One of the books was *Amish Grace* by Kraybill, Nolt and Weaver-Zercher, 2007.

What caught the attention of the world was two things:

the horror of that day

and the Amish response, willing to forgive.

It was a surprise to many people; incredible and unbelievable.

It was one of the men from that devastated community who asked the question I mentioned earlier:

“Why is everybody all surprised?”

They pointed to the gospels

and they reminded us that forgiveness was part of the community fabric,

woven into the way they expressed their faith.

A dentist in the community put it this way, “Those Amish people - they impress the *bejeebers* out of me.” (*Amish Grace*: 125) In interviews later some Amish admitted

“We are not always able to forgive; we have struggles too; we have a battle with forgiveness...we try to forgive but we are human too.”

It was not easy for that community, for those parents to extend forgiveness, but that was the option they chose. Their life of faith included regularly praying the Lord’s Prayer; remembering Jesus and Stephen’s examples, and paying attention to Jesus’ teaching, as we have been forgiven, so we are to forgive others.

Researchers say that in a sense

there are two kinds of forgiveness - decisional and emotional.

Decisional forgiveness is

deciding to accept the forgiveness option

rather than the option of getting even or striking back.

The new default setting for this community and its members is:

we are a forgiving people.

We promise not to act in revenge even though we might feel like it.

Emotional forgiveness is a long and difficult process.

Negative emotions, anger, resentment and hostility and hatred are replaced with positive feelings.

This is the hard work of forgiving:

absorbing the pain, extending empathy to the offender and purging bitterness.

One Amish elder, six months after,

“We are still processing some anger, but we are moving in the direction of forgiveness.”

(*Amish Grace*:187)

Forgiveness is not “forgive and forget,” but forgive and remember.

We decide ahead of time how we want to “remember what we cannot forget.”

“Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.” Lewis B. Smedes

Session Two – The New Math: Forgiveness

Last Monday I realized again that forgiveness is not only relevant and interesting in church but also in society. I was at the Wellness Institute at SOGH doing my walking and exercising. Over the last few years I have chatted with a number of people there. Sometimes only superficially, other times about important stuff. First names are used: Peter, three Fred's, Leni, Marie, Mickey, Wayne. Or we go only by face recognition. Over time we get to know things about each other.

Well, on Monday, I was talking with a lawyer who had suffered a stroke; she asked me, so what have you been teaching lately? Forgiveness I said, person to person forgiveness, to about 80 adults in a church. Previously she had said she wasn't religious, so I wondered whether my mentioning forgiveness would lead anywhere. That's interesting; what are some of the things you're talking about? Who are the authors you're reading? So I mentioned a few things.

What struck me was her immediate interest in the topic, a common human experience.

I also met a caregiver who works with a younger adult who is in a wheel chair since an accident. We greeted and got to talking. She too asked, so what have you been doing this weekend? I told her and she was interested in forgiveness as well. Earlier she had said she was raised Catholic but was not active. In recent years she was pursuing other interests. With her too, forgiveness, connected.

I mentioned to her that there were three broad groups of things that called for forgiveness: abuse, disloyalty and betrayal. She responded with a comment about having endured abuse herself in an earlier marriage and how difficult it had been to get beyond that traumatic experience. Finally being able to accept and forgive had been liberating for her. She was studying forgiveness now. She asked me to send her some information.

Maybe some of you have also had encounters with others and forgiveness this past week.

And in Tuesday's newspaper - “Forgiving the unthinkable” George Penner's story of someone killing his wife and son, 35 years ago. Sharing how difficult that had been for him; how complicated to rebuild his life after such a tragedy. He was able to get over it, but it has never been forgotten. He learned “how to remember that which cannot be forgotten.”

Forgiveness is an option for us in the church, as well as for those outside the church, anyone. Forgiveness touches the raw edges and deep wounds of life; and triggers long dormant memories and emotions.

In Jesus' sermon on the church, Mt 18 we find the passage that many of us know as the passage on church discipline - "if another member of the church sins against you, etc." We grew up understanding it this way: "if another member of the church sins" discipline him, etc.

It seems that Peter, was struck not because of the discipline dimension,
but because of the emphasis of forgiving repeatedly.
What caught his attention was Jesus surprising expectation
that the same person was to be forgiven more than once, repeatedly.

Peter raised an objection; not about having to forgive someone, but that he might need to do it over and over again! How often must I forgive? Seven times? (That would be quite generous already) And Jesus throws him a surprise answer - not seven but 70 x 7!! Don't even count, Peter; simply be forgiving.

Change your thinking. Move beyond a careful bookkeeping approach to life and relationships; simply become a forgiving person!

Jesus gave Peter a fresh option; reconsider your normal tendency, and upbringing, and even what he thought was biblical, "an eye for an eye," the law of equivalence, when there is hurt.

Choose the option of forgiveness; consider another way.

George Penner did this in the years after his wife and son were murdered.

The Amish of Nickel Mines showed that they had opted for forgiveness in their community and in their hearts long before they were faced with the existential need to be forgiving.

They were part of a subculture, a community that reminded them in worship and in life that as God forgives them they are to forgivers. But it is an option.

It was an option for Nelson Mandela and for Desmond Tutu, and is for us.

Challenge: to include person to person forgiveness in our thinking and talking about discipleship.

Recap: Never-ending Conversations; word cloud; being counter-cultural; memories; Two prayers, (Jesus, Stephen) one command (you also must forgive) and one question (why is everyone all surprised?)

Did you bump into the topic of forgiveness during the week, in addition to living with one of the passages?

Working with texts: what struck you? Surprises? Fresh insight?

Genesis 37-50
Luke 15:11-32
Matt. 18: 21-35
Col. 3:12-13

Forgiveness in the New Testament

Forgiveness occurs only 15 times in the NT and
among those passages are six that speak of *no forgiveness*
for the sin against the Holy Spirit;

the verb forgive occurs 22 times - and has to do with

- the authority of Jesus to forgive, and
- the questions of the disciples on how often they need to forgive someone, and
- the importance of forgiving when we are praying.

Let's also recall the passage where Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and Jesus' critics wondered about Jesus' right to forgive - "who can forgive sins but God alone?"

There are other things worth noting:

- like Jesus forgiving someone even though no forgiveness was asked for (Mk 2:1-12); in fact Mark says Jesus saw their faith, the friends of the paralytic, and forgave him!

And remember Jesus word of forgiveness from the cross,

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Neither the Romans nor the Jewish leaders were asking for forgiveness;
they were super sure they were doing nothing wrong!

Do we think Jesus prayer for them was answered?

I also noticed that something was missing. In the books on forgiveness and grace that I've read, by Smedes, Yancey, Augsburg - there are many stories of forgiveness, but in the NT stories of person-to-person forgiveness are hard to find.

I found only one - Luke 15, the father and two sons. And the word "forgive" is not even used! But it sure seems like forgiveness happened.

Can you think of any other passages showing person to person forgiveness in the NT?

Stephen's example comes close, but his forgiving words are spoken to God, not to his stoners.

Beyond abstract terms to metaphors buried in narrative

Augsburger has identified 15 images, metaphors that are closely connected to forgiveness:

Biblical metaphors of forgiveness used by Jesus in his subversive teaching, storytelling, and symbolic actions expressed aspects of forgiveness. (13)

A debt ... Mt 18:21-35; cancellation of a debt, small and forgettable, or large and unpayable symbolizes forgiving.

A stone ... John 8:2-11; the stone of execution that no one has the right to throw because no one is without sin.

A robe, ring, sandals, and feast ... Luke 15 22-24; son receives these four symbols as signs of acceptance - clothing, status, dignity and celebration.

A hug, a kiss ... Lk 15:20 son welcomed by his father

Paralysis ended ... Mt 9:1-8, Mk 2:10; paralyzed muscles renew, arms and legs respond in action and health through forgiveness.

Illness healed ... Luke 5: 17-26; illness a metaphor of brokenness and healing is equated with forgiveness.

Blindness cured ... Mk 4:10-12; ability to see another again, hear another once more, turns one toward reality and in turning receives God's forgiveness.

Table manners ... Mt 6:11-12, John 13:18, Mt 26:26-29. Aramaic word for forgiveness has root "table", Jesus transforms sharing of food into a metaphor of realized forgiveness. The older brother will not come to the table, will not forgive. Sacrament of forgiveness is bread and wine shared at the table.

Erotic perfume, tears, kisses ... Luke 7:36-50; symbols of repentance and gratitude recast as metaphors of realized forgiveness, evidence of a woman's deep love after she was accepted in spite of her past behaviour.

So, in the NT we have words by Jesus and Paul challenging us to forgive and metaphors tucked in narratives hinting strongly of the power forgiveness, but only one example of person to person forgiveness. I wondered, why?

Could it be they assumed we'd remember examples of forgiveness in the OT? But even in the OT there is no abundance of person-to-person forgiveness stories.

NT writers also say nothing about the possibility of forgiveness being misunderstood. Nor does it deal with other questions that arise in our minds.

Does forgiveness mean

- pretending that a wrong did not occur
- forgetting that it happened
- condoning or excusing it
- being indifferent to it, as if it didn't really matter

"I did mind and it did matter, otherwise there would be nothing to forgive." (N.T. Wright)

Another question, does forgiveness mean we're being soft on wrongdoing,
soft on betrayal, soft on disloyalty?

Does forgiveness mean we are letting others walk all over us?
That it's too easy on the wrongdoer?

Something else the NT writers don't do is name what people might do instead of forgiving
nursing the hurt, keeping it going, dwelling on the incident,
wanting to get even, planning revenge,
waiting for the right moment to 'sock it to them'.

Nor does the NT say much about the benefits of forgiveness to the forgiver.

Our Experience: Alternatives to forgiveness and forbearance

We can retaliate - eye for eye

We can take revenge - I'll get you

We can nurse a grudge - do a slow boil on it

We can create an enduring grievance story of a long standing hurt

We can resort to stoning.

We don't use real stones, (that would be barbaric); we are more civilized than that, but many of us are stoners, nevertheless, we stone with words, first silently and secretly in our minds; later audibly, openly, for others to hear (gossip or accusation)

Perhaps you remember being stoned with words - words spoken to us or about us

- words of rejection or judgment
- words that despise or belittle
- words of sarcasm or denial
- words of betrayal

Jesus was stoned by Peter's words of denial ("I don't know the man!"); and by Judas's words of betrayal ("Greetings, Rabbi" followed by a kiss).

So often it is words, words spoken or heard,
that create distance, avoidance, fear, guilt and uncertainty, disruption, absence of shalom

So often it is words we have heard or spoken, and deeds,
that create the need for forgiveness or forbearance
that prevent forgiveness from being considered
or, they lead to something else.

In our time many are being "stoned" with words -
they do not necessarily die quickly,
but their inner spirit, their joy is silenced,
they suffer invisibly until they too, like Stephen, die.

There is one letter that gives attention to "stoning by words" - James 3
where the tongue is named a fire, a restless evil
"no one can tame the tongue."

James says: "Brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."
Stoning by words must stop!

Verbal stoning as an alternative to forgiving shows up everywhere, repeatedly
between brothers and sisters,
between parents and children,
between spouses, between friends,
between members of the same church,
between colleagues at work.

If we choose the forgiveness option, we forgo the stoning option.

The Joseph and his brothers Saga Genesis 37-50

Let's now think about a messy family situation found in the OT,
where forgiveness became the option of choice.

We know the story well. It stretches over two decades, nearly four decades and many miles of sand;
involves betrayal and deep hurt, (more than forbearance needed here)
includes mistakes made by the father of these twelve sons.

The older brothers hatched a plan on how to get even with their spoiled brother who tells his dreams of superiority. One day when they see him coming in his coat of many colors, they said, "Come let's kill him and throw him into one of those cisterns and say an animal killed him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams." (37:17-21)

Reuben tries to change their minds. And Joseph is sold into slavery.

For years the brothers had to keep their secret, and lie to their father.

Relationships disturbed; tension, suspicion, part of the air they breathed

For years they reminded each other, not to spill the beans.

It involves the strong possibility of Joseph nursing his hurt and taking revenge against his brothers.

Even while they were dealing with the guilt of having gotten rid of him.

The story reaches its climax in the office of the PM of Egypt. They are there to buy grain, but more than grain is on their minds. Memories. Guilt.

Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." 42:22

Things that reached back twenty years.

They were many miles from where it had happened.

There had been feelings, thoughts, anger, words and deeds

betrayal of a brother, and deception of their father.

They lived with this deceit and this coverup, suspicion and guilt for two decades.

Repeatedly they had tried to keep their guilt submerged and their fears hidden.

But even on this business trip they could not keep

the skeletons from rattling in the closet.

Apparently time hadn't healed the wounds

and guilt refused to remain speechless forever.

They were trapped by their past -

a past strewn with broken relationships,

with deceit, lying, cruelty, suspicion, fear and guilt.

Current misfortunes were connected with past misdeeds in their own minds.

They were not free. They were imprisoned by their past.

After they returned to Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph,

who knew who they were and knew their discomfort,
could contain himself no longer. "I am Joseph, is my father still alive?"
His brothers could not answer him for "they were dismayed in his presence."

Dismayed? Yes. They had caused broken relationships. They were loaded with guilt only to be removed by the forgiveness and acceptance of the one whom they had wronged, Joseph. Now in a position of power over them.

"I am Joseph, your brother," in spite of what you have done to me.

Joseph did what is called for in the NT - he forgave,
he absorbed the hurt, refused to reply in kind.
No doubt he had often considered getting even,
now he had the chance and the power to do so, but he did not.
He did the unnatural thing in such a situation - he forgave.

The past was not swept under the carpet.
Imagine what went through Joseph's mind,
before he identified himself.
Imagine what went through the minds of his brothers
as Rueben spoke those accusing words, on that business trip,
"Did I not tell you?"

Remembering was painful, emotional, cathartic.
Joseph was willing to forgive
even though the past with its failures was remembered.
Joseph chose Jesus' alternative long before Jesus was born
the hard, even unnatural, but the better option.
I'm sure it wasn't easy for him - even after 20 years.

Seventeen years later, What if... Genesis 50:15

The Joseph saga ends with a surprising narrative insight.
The revealing meeting between Joseph and his brothers came
20 years after he had been sold into slavery,

Reuben accused his brothers....circle of brothers ... tense conversation.

Another 17 years passed; living comfortably in Egypt, under Joseph's protection and care. Then Jacob died. And it became clear that the comfortable life in Egypt had not been without its discomfort; its awkward moments.

Mourning period, trip to Palestine for burial, return to Egypt, "Joseph with his brothers"

Again, the circle of brothers, tense conversation,

"What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" They approach Joseph, "Your father gave us this instruction before he died. Say to Joseph, I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. Now therefore please forgive ... they wept... Joseph reassured them, "Do not be afraid, have no fear."

-this scenario is true to experience isn't it?

-a family meeting on a Saturday morning (1970's) after death of the father, strife, discord, threats

-how can the lingering suspicion be dealt with in the souls of those who have been forgiven?

It is often a long and difficult journey.

When Jesus urged forgiveness he did not give it a time line.

Nor did Paul.

It takes time to remember the painful experience

to decide, with the Lord's help, to walk the path

that Joseph was able to walk, and Jesus and Stephen.

To conclude, three statements,

If I don't forgive I remain in the grip of what was done to me.

Louise Cummings

If I don't forgive I am compromising my own health and quality of life.

If I don't learn to forgive we are not living up to God's expectations of us.

"Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future." (Smedes)

"The **scandal of forgiveness** confronts anyone who agrees to a ceasefire just because someone says I'm sorry. When I feel wronged I can contrive a hundred reasons against forgiveness. *He*

needs to learn a lesson. I don't want to encourage irresponsible behaviour. I'll let her stew for a while; it will do her good. She needs to learn that actions have consequences. I was the wronged party - its not up to me to make the first move. How can I forgive if he's not even sorry?" Yancey, 96

Session Three – The Un-Easy Yoke of Forbearance

Life-long Transformation

Each of us is on a journey, a life-long journey of transformation, of learning the habits of the Christian life, of noticing missteps and taking corrective measures, of discovering the shape and contours of an abundant life.

Fortunately this journey is not a solo trip, it is with others, heading in the same direction, seeking to learn what being a follower of Jesus might mean.

This is sometimes a painful, demanding journey, to keep on 'not being conformed', to keep on 'being transformed' to move from "self-minded-ness" to "other-minded-ness."

Great Expectations

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." Ephesians 4:2

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Colossians 3:12-14

1 Cor. 12:14-31 and Romans 14:1-15:7

These texts are demanding and relational, social, personal but not private.

Paul speaks of this journey of transformation when he uses the language of "putting off and putting on", or "cloth yourselves."

This morning we are giving attention to one item on this life-long agenda: forbearance. I have called it an "uneasy yoke."

Untangling Forgiveness and Forbearance

In the first session, I said that I was making a distinction between forgiveness and forbearance. Based on reflection on experience. My conclusion: forbearance is a greater need among us than forgiveness.

Some of us have hard, difficult experiences that really call for forgiveness, but most of us have not had many experiences lately in which we have had to cope with abuse, disloyalty or betrayal. But I assume that all of us have had to deal with the need for forbearance during this month.

This is not to downplay the importance of forgiveness, but to distinguish what forgiveness is for, when it is needed, and what forbearance is for.

According to Lewis Smedes, there are three groups of experiences that call for person to person forgiveness: disloyalty, betrayal and abuse.

Judas was a betrayer, identifying Jesus with a kiss and a greeting and then turning him over to be arrested. Betrayal calls for forgiveness.

Disloyalty was Peter's problem - he had pledged to be faithful to Jesus even to death, but around that fire loudly affirmed, even with an oath, that he didn't even know the man. Disloyalty calls for forgiveness.

Abuse - a violation of trust, often an abuse of power - spousal abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse. Some people bind themselves to others "with a rope woven of brutality" (Smedes) and urge their victims to keep their little secret. Abuse calls for forgiveness.

But thankfully, most of us rarely experience these things; at least that's my impression and observation - I don't know whether you agree with this or not.

Then there are lots of other hurts and irritations in life. There are some hurts that we can swallow, shrug off, and chalk up to the risks of being earthen vessels in a crowded world. Part of the reality of living up close with others.

"We should not try to forgive when all we need is simply a little spiritual generosity." (Smedes)

An Uneasy Yoke

I'm calling this business of having a little spiritual generosity an "uneasy yoke", for several reasons. It seems to me that even a little spiritual generosity is not that easy to come by. We have days when it seems easy, but then on other days we have a terrible time, we stumble, and mess things up, between ourselves and others.

Being spiritually, relationally generous is a challenge because it goes against the grain of our humanity; and it's not talked about too often, it seems. It's seldom named as one of the markers of the Christian life. When was it mentioned in catechism class or in church membership discussions?

It's also an uneasy and sometimes irritating yoke because it shifts the focus away from invisible things, like correct believing in certain propositions, creeds, statements of faith, to thinking of being Christian as practice, which is visible, noticeable, bodily, beyond abstractions, and detectable.

To be faithful is not affirming a set of right beliefs in our hearts and minds, but of being part of a "community of performance" (Diana Butler Bass). Put this way it is like the expression used in the NT, referring to believers as "those of the way." (Acts 9:2)

This particularly, is what I find difficult, not always, but from time to time; saying I believe in forbearance in my heart, or in forgiving is fairly easy, but the doing of it, the practice of this way of life is where I have problems.

In *Christianity after Religion* Diana Butler Bass wrote,

"God's rule does not fall out of heaven, to those who wait. People of God must live the kingdom by purposefully doing actions that rehearse love, charity, kindness, goodness, mercy, peace, forgiveness and justice."

"Over time Western Christianity came to be defined as a belief system about God, but throughout the first five centuries it was understood as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful way of life in this world - not a neat set of doctrines, an esoteric belief, or the promise of heaven."

Early believers were called those of The Way. Members were not held accountable for their opinions about things, but rather how well they practiced love of God and neighbour." (Butler Bass 149)

The primary 'why' for any Christian practice is that the action in some way imitates Jesus.

Our Anabaptist forbears recaptured some of this in the expression that the essence of Christian faith was *Nachfolge*.

Christian spirituality is grounded in the principle of imitation, be imitators of God ... Eph 5:1-2

"Spiritual practices are living pictures of God's intention for a world of love and justice." Butler Bass 160

Scot McKnight has expressed it more recently in what he called the Jesus Creed: Love God and Love Neighbour.

Forbearance is one of the specifics of loving the neighbour.

We have heard about loving our neighbours but how many of us who preached or taught have ever singled out forbearance as a prime example of what neighbourliness looks like, not in the abstract but with skin on.

It is downright specific. We talk generally and comfortably about loving our neighbours and each one is left to decide how specific that becomes for us.

Forbearance may seem invisible, but...

On the surface, Paul doesn't seem to pay much attention to it either - at least he doesn't use the terms "forbear" or "forbearance" very often.

Have we perhaps overlooked something in our reading of the NT? My hunch is we have. I looked at Paul's writings with this question in mind: How else might Paul be writing about "forbearance" without using the word?

Here's what I found: Paul uses a number of terms to convey the meaning of forbearance in his writing. He uses the phrase "one another" and the word "love". Both sound harmless, non-offensive.

Each of us has grown up with our private, comfortable understanding of "one another" and of "love"; and that's what we automatically think of until we pay attention to the details, the nuances, and notice that Paul actually 'unpacks' the meanings of "love" and "one another" in surprising, challenging, sometimes irritating ways. At least I found my toes being stepped on repeatedly by what he wrote.

I found about 15 ways in which Paul expands, unpacks the meaning of "love" and the rarely used term "forbearance". That's how forbearance became an "uneasy" yoke.

No longer a harmless abstraction.

There are many texts that have "one another" in them. Look them up, underline them.

Bearing with one another - Col 3:12, Eph 4:2

- love one another (14 times)
- no judgment of another
- live in harmony with one another
- welcome one another
- care for one another
- agree with one another
- bear one another's burdens
- be kind to one another
- admonish one another
- encourage one another

- seek to do good to one another
- exhort one another every day
- provoke one another to love and good deeds
- confess sins to one another
- be hospitable to one another
- serve one another
- bear with each other.

Enough already!

When the specifics are named like this, I get uncomfortable, it's a surprising intrusion into my world.

I think, so how often have I actually done these relational things?

How often have I received "one another-ing" in these ways?

Paul's words invite us to imagine life with others differently.

These 15 specifics run counter to my tendency to be self-minded rather than other-minded.

This list of specifics is demanding because people are so very different, different than we would like them to be!

"If only everyone would be smart enough to agree with me! Live like I do. That I could put up with! No problem."

It's both these specifics and the differences that exist between people that call for forbearance.

If only Paul had left well enough alone and simply said

"love one another" then we could manage;

(Do you believe in loving one another? Sure. Do you love one another? Well, that depends.)

If only people weren't so different -

interests, habits, attitudes, and convictions,

there would be little demand for forbearance.

Maybe Paul was given a nudge by the Spirit to unpack what he meant by these nice sounding generalizations: love and forbearance.

Love becomes a verb rather than a feeling - 1Cor 13

What's to forbear? What's to endure? What's to put up with?

What was Paul thinking about when he wrote, "Love bears all things?" "All things" - you've got to kidding!

Lighter matters:

Consider annoyances. People annoy us by being late for appointments,

by telling boring stories at dinner, and

by how they drive, how much/little time they need to get ready

by cutting in front of us at the checkout stand.

Such annoyances are real, but forgiveness is not required!

Consider slights. People we want to notice us, ignore us; someone didn't even let on they realized we were in the room, teachers we liked forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not even invite us to his daughter's wedding. No forgiveness required!

Consider defeats. Some people succeed when we fail; they get promotions when we are ignored; they get the glittering prizes we want; the attention; they always seem to be there ahead of us—and to make things worse, these people who beat us are sometimes our friends. No forgiveness required!

Yes, these are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving.

What is required in these cases is forbearance: for us to be tolerant, to be magnanimous, to indulge them, to put up with, endure, to be humble. To cut them some slack.

Bear all things! being more other-minded, less self-minded.

(Often being forbearing involves controlling our speech, answering back or not, we feel under provocation and it becomes speech. But how? What tone? Could it be that sometimes forbearance means keeping silent when provoked, giving a soft answer (Prov. 15:1) or not to answer at all.

Learning how to speak - in grammar and posture of forbearance - 'I' rather than 'you', exploring rather than jumping to conclusions.

Weightier matters: Living in Community

I found two longer passages where Paul deals with the underlying issues related to forbearance without so much as using the word.

I Corinthians 12:12-31 and Romans 14:1-15:7

In using the metaphor of the human body to talk about church, he's unpacking "forbearance."

The body with its diverse parts becomes a call to forbearance.

The body is a one-piece celebration of diversity,

an affirmation of differences working in harmony;

an emphasis on appreciation, affirmation and acceptance,

and no lamentation (it's too bad) that others are so different.

No part of the body can say, I don't need the other parts,

or, I am better than that part.

The body metaphor celebrates differences and uniqueness, (even though we seem to want sameness) and calls for forbearance that supports vibrant diversity and mind boggling interdependence affirmation of things we experience as different.

Romans 14:1-15:7

Paul wrote an extended case study in Century one, for people who needed to learn how to get along with each other, In other words, they needed to learn forbearance,

Jewish background members and Gentiles

slaves and free, somebodies and nobodies, together

some strong in the faith, and those who are weaker

some really uptight, and hung up on details, being picky, even legalistic

others easy-going, free spirited, of generous spirit, super gracious.

All of them together in one new body, the church,

called together by faith in Christ.

Forbearance, putting up with differences, was what was called for

but they had problems with forbearance, (just as we do today)

problems with each other in everyday things

the more narrow-minded judged those who were more liberal

the more liberal despised those who were too narrow.

Rather than judge, forbear, tolerate, cut them some slack,

Rather than despise, forbear, tolerate, cut them some slack.

Rather than wanting, desperately wanting, conformity (be like me)

Paul urges diversity and unity as coexisting.

And unity is not sameness but a welcomed diversity.

Forbearance was called for, but forbearance was in short supply.

Being more “other-minded” was called for,

but being “self-minded” was being practiced.

Paul caught on to the dynamics of the situation

and he named the issues,

even the emotions attached to lack of forbearance

judging or despising one another - inner and invisible.

He calls for growth and transformation -

change of attitude, change of practice, of daily, invisible habits.

This call is both practical and theological - “Welcome one another therefore just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Forbearance calls for “being fully convinced in their own minds.” 14:5

A new paradigm: develop strong convictions and amazing acceptance of others, simultaneously.

About what? Both about our beliefs and our expression of beliefs.

Paul had an amazing imagination! That such a thing was possible. In the same body, the church. I have come to believe this and you have come to believe differently. We have both been welcomed by God in Christ.

-being vegetarian or eating all foods

-BFC issues - sexuality. Understandings are on a wide spectrum.

Yes, I have been accepted by God in my uniqueness and I want to be accepting of all others,

Wherever and whenever differences, unique traits, convictions, backgrounds and habits show up in my family, with my friends, with fellow residents, in my church.

By the grace of God I will become more other-minded, less self-minded, I will intentionally develop practices of forbearance.

The church is a “community of performance” where faith is expressed differently, where following Jesus is expressed uniquely, and where forbearance is practiced with enthusiasm.

Welcome one another therefore, with differences in faith and practice, just as Christ has welcomed you.

The uneasy yoke of forbearance will become more and more evident.

Session Four – Forgiveness is Fine, But ...

I suggested we were opening a “can of worms”,

a vital part of our faith journey;

nurturing “never-ending conversations”

with ourselves and with others about things that matter,

revisiting questions, memories and emotions

that we may well have paid attention to before;

questioning some of our assumptions, even our certainties,

trying to make sense of things afresh,

(something we should never stop doing, since biblical truth is not static but embryonic, life-changing and transformative, through all the stages of life)

Some of our remembering may have opened old wounds, things we thought were over and done with, but still alive and active. We don’t want “to live in the past, but we must learn somehow to live with the past.”

We were learning how to remember the things we cannot forget.

And hopefully, “learning to be patient toward all that is yet unsolved in our hearts”

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

Last Tuesday I wondered what could happen with us here this morning. I know it's not actually going to happen but if we had unlimited time, time to divide into groups of three or four and talk with each other about forgiveness, there's no saying what might happen.

Especially when we go beyond the 'idea' of forgiveness and the arms-length discussion of it, to the emotional rawness that is embedded in the stories we remember, the ones we dare to tell, as well as in the biblical texts, there is no telling what might happen.

What I mean is we might dare to make the silent conversations we have been having with ourselves, and maybe with God, about ourselves, our memories and our experiences with forgiveness or the lack of it, the pain of it, if we dare to make these silent conversations audible for another to hear, then we don't know what might happen, do we?

In one passage Paul said, "all must carry their own loads" (Gal 6:5) and this sounds quite private, but what if we socialize this carrying of loads to include bearing one another's burdens, and baring one's souls in "small circles of the imperfect" and learn to practice the habits practiced in AA. Then we would probably experience what a British researcher has named, "rehabilitative story-telling." We need what has been called "the fellowship of slow forgivers" with whom to share the difficult joy forgiving others.

I imagine that for some people such conversations might seem a bit frightening, since it does require some level of trust as well as self-disclosure which we may be hesitant about. And no wonder, some things have been kept private for a long time.

There may be another reason, seldom mentioned, rooted in our upbringing. A Catholic writer, Joan Chittister, wrote about it in a book on aging. "Old age tells us we ourselves have failed often, have never truly been perfect and that that is completely all right. ... We are who we are and so is everybody else. Life does not have to be perfect to be perfect. It only needs to be forgiving and forgiven."

This is a challenge to our emphasis on faithful discipleship and to a Bible verse many of us learned early on. Mt 5:48, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." What a standard to measure ourselves by!

How can we self-disclose our lack of perfection if we take these words seriously? Perhaps we have misunderstood Jesus words. He is not at all meaning ethical, moral perfection. He had just said, God lets his sun shine on the just and unjust. Be perfect in your love; love indiscriminately as God loves all people!

We all belong in the "circles of the imperfect." That's where we wrestle and struggle and receive the courage to begin afresh. Forgiveness is new beginnings with God and with each other.

When we probe deeply among our memories, our failures and our fears it's reminiscent of Jacob's wrestling match at Peniel before he was to meet his estranged brother Esau.

In that all-night wrestling match Jacob wrestled with the unknown awaiting him, anxious and uncertain; he struggled with his own past, recent as well as decades old stuff, and he was challenged to declare who he really was, without pretense.

He was alone but not really alone, because his past and the people of his life seemed to be there with him. It was dark as midnight but he saw things more clearly than ever before; and he was changed by the time the sun rose, and had a limp to remind him of it for the rest of his life.

Did Jacob crave this encounter with himself and with God? Probably not. He resisted owning up to who he really was and figuring out how to meet his estranged brother.

On the one hand he wanted to meet his brother whom he had not seen for 20 years, but on the other hand he could argue against going through with the whole thing.

We might identify with Jacob and admit our own reservations, maybe even hangups, about forgiveness and forbearance, and our resistance to this option in life.

During these weeks we have talked about the positive aspects of being forgiving people, of wanting to be forgiving and forbearing, but it isn't easy to do. Remember what the Amish said, "We are not always able to forgive. We have struggles too." (*Amish Grace*, 113) In fact one writer has spoken about "the scandal of forgiveness." (Yancey)

"Nobody seems to be born with much talent for forgiving", wrote Lewis Smedes, "we all have to learn from scratch."

What we know:

Forgiveness puts life back together again, opens the way to growing and loving.

Forgiveness is more important to the one who forgives, than to the one forgiven.

Not to forgive imprisons us in the past and locks out all potential for change. (P. Yancey)

Without forgiveness there is no future. (Tutu)

When we genuinely forgive we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner set free was us. (Smedes)

Forgiveness is love's revolution against life's unfairness.

According to Diana Butler Bass, Forgiveness is one of the twelve practices of the Christian faith.

But then there's a but... or, a What about ...? or, a What if...?

It struck me during the week that we have a story of a man who resisted going the forgiveness route in the NT, and I'm not referring to the forgiven debtor in Matt 18 who didn't forgive the man indebted to him.

I'm referring to the much maligned older brother, a model son in some ways, but unwilling to join the forgiveness party for his younger brother.

I think we could imagine his resistance to being forgiving, not in principle, but in this particular case.

He might well have thought, I believe in forgiveness (that's what I learned in the synagogue) but this is too easy on him.

Remember what he did! Think it through man, is it fair? Shouldn't there be a time for probation? I'll consider forgiving after watching him like a hawk for a few months.

And what about justice, "eye for an eye," etc. (Deut 19:21). That old text sounds like if you mess up you have to pay. Has my brother paid for anything at all?

We might name a few other arguments today...

I resist forgiving because it doesn't always lead to **reconciliation** and restoration of a relationship, renewal of trust. True, reconciliation is not always in the picture, but moving forward with a healed past is.

I resist forgiving because of the deep **anger and resentment**, the bitterness I have felt after this was done to me. I devoutly wish them ill. I actually hate them. "Eventually hate needs healing. Anger is a sign we are alive and well. Hate is a sign we are sick and need healing." (Smedes)

We may need to learn how to cope with anger and resentment. Anger in itself is not wrong; it's an emotion, a response. It's how we feel. "A powerful feeling that takes hold of us under certain circumstances, when hurt or frustrated."

"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

What do we do with it? Feel guilty for being angry? Nurture it? Deny it?

Can we renounce the right to vent anger on each other? Can we admit it to ourselves, to God, to another person that we struggle with anger? To the one we're angry with and not retaliate, but ask for help in overcoming it?

"Only we can free ourselves from the burden of bitterness old anger brings with it still."
(Chittister, 192)

"Bitterness is like a cancer that enters the soul. It does more harm to those that hold it than those whom it is held against." Terry Waite

Sharing our struggle in a “circle of slow forgivers” may help.

I resist forgiving because of the **chance of repetition**. A possible risk that we take. That is always a risk in any relationship; a given of life.

I resist forgiving because i struggle with **restorative justice** and retributive justice. I wish I could get even, pay him back.

Forgiveness is not an evasion of justice or an exception to justice; it is an essential element of God's healing, reconciling justice.

For the Pharisees God's justice is merciless, unforgiving, heartless and cold. For Jesus, God's justice is merciful, healing, restoring. To forgive is to give up the more normal response of retributive justice and move in the direction of restorative justice.

I resist forgiving because it might **imply indifference**; as if what happened didn't really matter. But it did matter, and I minded otherwise there would be nothing to forgive. (Tom Wright)

Question: how have you struggled with the resistance to forgiveness?

Forgiving from the heart

Let's leave our reservations and hang-ups about forgiveness hanging in the air and delve into a story that seems to be a commentary on the words of Mt 18:35 where Jesus raises the stakes to a frightening level, “forgive one another from the heart.”

Let's think about the father in Jesus' parable of the two sons (Luke 15).

Another family situation, like Joseph and his eleven brothers.

This time it's a father with two sons. Just a parable.

Everyone is put to the test: the father, the two sons, and of course, you and I (that's what stories do.)

The father was put to a severe test, wasn't he?

Luke doesn't explore what might have gone on within him as he experienced what he experienced.

Nor does Luke so much as mention his wife, the mother of the two sons.

What was she dealing with during this difficult time? We can only imagine.

Kenneth Bailey, an American NT scholar, (died 2014), lived in the Middle East for some 20 years and delved into the culture of that time using Jesus' parables.

He has helped me imagine what may well have been going on with the father, how difficult it must have been. He wrote the book, *Poet and Peasant*.

I mean, try to imagine a son coming to you, and literally wishing you dead, to your face, asking for his share of the inheritance.

He had never heard of such a thing even being possible; cutting family bonds to shreds, never heard of anyone ever doing that.

What a shame! To be wished dead before your time; shocking to hear his words, when you're not even sick yet!

A shame and a shock to see him leave, a very sad day, and the whole village aware of what was going on. It was no secret. Everyone felt bad for me, that I had to suffer such indignity. I, being one of the elders in our village, and now this. Till now I had had a good reputation, I was respected.

It took quite a while for the son to show up on the horizon; seemed like forever to me.

Time for thinking, talking with myself, suffering and turmoil, and silence.

Believe me, I was waiting, hoping for him to return, not so I could punish him good for what he had put me through.

No, I got over my anger, hoped he would return. I loved my son as he was, as he had been.

One day I spotted him, slowly coming up the slope,

At first I wasn't sure it was him; he looked like a beggar but then I knew in my heart. Yes, this is my son, he's coming home. My heart went wild.

Without hesitation I gathered up my outer garments, in broad daylight and I ran, in public, knowing it was a shame; it had always been a shame for an adult to run, but I ran to meet him that day, shame or no shame.

I hugged him and kissed him and I gave a party for him. Invited all my friends.

I forgave him with all my heart and I wanted everyone to know.

He wore my ring, my robe, and sandals. And the veal - how tender and juicy.

What a celebration! Music and dancing. No holding back.

Everything was fine, except for one thing; you see it was our custom that the eldest son would serve meat to the guests, first to the honored guest, today my younger my son, but he didn't do it that day.

I pleaded with my older son to come, but he refused, knowing that by not joining in, not serving the main dish, another shame was heaped on me in front of the whole village.

He didn't even want to admit that this beggar-looking young man was his brother. He referred to him as "this son of yours."

Do I have what it takes to forgive not only my younger son but the older one as well?

Amidst the festivities I remembered having heard a reading from the prophet Hosea in our synagogue.

It was a soliloquy, *Yahweh* wrestling with himself, just as I had been wrestling within myself for all this time.

Yahweh asked,

"How can I give you up, O Israel? I've loved you, I've raised you but you kept on forsaking me, running after other gods. I will not execute my fierce anger ... for I am God and no mortal ... I will not come in wrath."

Somehow I discovered in the depth of my heart that forgiveness was fine - it was the answer. It was best for my sons and it was best for me.

It was difficult but right. I found peace.

I remember what Rev Lee the Korean Christian said, "the cycle of retaliation and bitterness, this ongoing revenge needs to stop. Someone has to start something different."

And I remember another One who struggled with forgiving, God himself, in that soliloquy in Hosea 11:8-9

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel? ...

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger;

I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for **I am God and no mortal**,

the Holy One in your midst,

and **I will not come in wrath.**

“Forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Col 3:13

Let the conversations continue

- within ourselves, about our past and our present
- with others, trusting that self-disclosure is part of “rehabilitative story-telling”
- with texts and stories

Conversing is an important dimension of our continuing journey.

Let’s work at making forgiving our default setting; we decide that we want to be that sort of people, that sort of a community, where forgiveness heals wounds and opens doors for the future.

Let’s practice the virtues of forgiving just as we have received forgiveness both from God and from others.