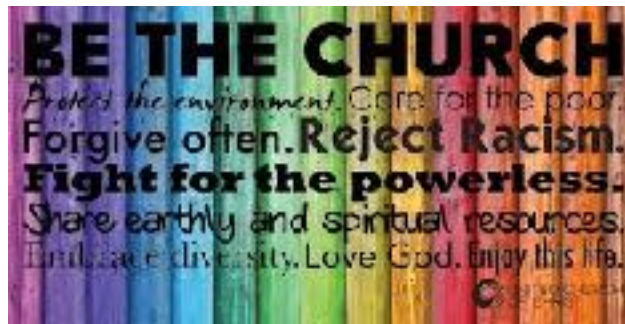
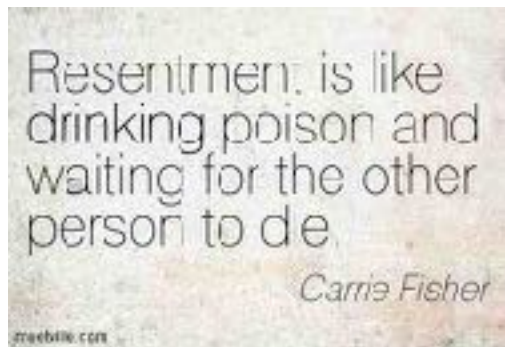


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 6, 2019
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
“*Why Forgive Often?*”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Micah 7:18-20
Christian Scripture: Matthew 18:21-22



Welcome to the third sermon in our eight-week series ‘Be the Church’. I believe this week’s theme, ‘Forgive Often’ is very thought provoking. ‘Forgiving often’ has been very much on my heart and mind lately, for many reasons.

One, it was the theme of our closing worship at the Vermont Conference (UCC) clergy convocation this past September in Burlington. The small clergy group of which I was apart focused on a quotation attributed to the *Star Wars* actress Carrie Fisher or to Malachy McCourt (depending on the source):



“Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die”. Just let that sink in. “Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die”. This quote haunts me because it seems to flip, what for some reason is, the false assumption that to harbor animosity toward someone injures the other person to a realization that the grudge actually injures me. Therefore, what is otherwise an injunction to do something for the benefit of someone else, that is to forgive, is actually an injunction to do something positive for oneself. The quotation reveals to us that forgiveness is not necessarily for another person’s benefit, but rather for ours.

I have noticed that when I do not forgive, the mental and spiritual energy I spend on the other person only disadvantages me and has *zero* effect on the other person. Not only do I feel like rubbish when I resent someone else, not only am I consumed with negativity, but I in no way solve a problem nor do I injure the person I feel has aggrieved me. I find that forgiving someone actually provides me much

relief and it allows me to expend my mental and spiritual energy on something positive.



Another reason I have been thinking about 'forgiving often' is because recently I have been forgiven. This past week we had a late night meeting at church. Everyone was tired; I wanted to go home; the faster the meeting progressed the better, so much so that I spoke over the top of another. And I was justifiably told 'what for'! I deserved it. For two days, I thought and felt terrible about my behavior. So, I decided to no longer feel terrible about it and I told the person when I met her that I was sorry for what I did. She forgave me, and we had a little chuckle about it. To be honest, I am quite confident she forgave me before I apologized. But, I think it was very therapeutic for us for me to say 'I'm sorry' and for her to forgive me.



Forgiveness should also be a key theme on all of your minds as well. This week in the news Amber Guyger, a trained police officer in Texas, was convicted and sentenced for only ten years for killing



Botham Jean, an innocent unarmed black man in his own apartment. She will likely be released from prison on parole after only five years. Amber Guyger admittedly shot to kill without asking questions and without first ascertaining if her own life was in any danger when she entered an apartment she mistakenly thought was hers.¹



During the trial, Botham Jean’s younger brother expressed no ill-will against Amber and he very emotionally pleaded for the judge to allow him to hug her.

¹ Reis Thebault and Brittney Shammatt, “Amber Guyger, police officer who shot a man to death in his apartment, found guilty of murder”, *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2019.

At first, I was actually disturbed by the younger brother's request. I was disturbed because I often saw South African Blacks offer extraordinary acts of reconciliation with their White oppressors and I see radical acts of forgiveness of Whites by African-Americans in the United States², *but I rarely see it reciprocated*. I do not see many radical acts of forgiveness by Whites of Blacks. On a case by-case basis, historically, and societally, Blacks have rarely been offered the same grace and forgiveness by Whites that Blacks have offered to Whites for centuries. But, I digress, this is not a social justice sermon; it is a devotional sermon.



My unease as the forgiveness shown to Amber passed because I realized that Botham's younger brother did not forgive and embrace Amber to bring about racial harmony. He did it so that he could move on positively with his life.

² For example, an African-American congregation expressed forgiveness of a white supremacist in the aftermath of his committing a mass shooting at their church.

anger, rage, resentment,
bitterness, anger, pain,
fury, hurt, hatred, grief,
injure, revenge, regret,
remorse, shame, sorrow,
disappointment, blame, wounding, ache

Forgiveness.

Though a young man, he knows that which most of us do not yet know: that hate, rage, resentment, revenge, and the holding-on to justifiable grievances only consumes us; it only poisons us.



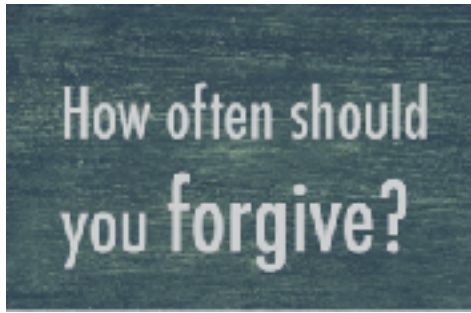
The young brother of the man brutally gunned down in his own home understood that which we find so hard to understand: forgiveness is for the one who forgives!

Allow me to conclude with some empathy for those who are hurting too much to forgive. I want you to hear me now: I have two hurts in my life for which I have not yet been able to forgive. And, guess what? That's O.K. I am not ready yet. It is O.K that I am not ready because I desire to be in a place and at time where I can forgive. That's where I am headed. And I will get there through the power of

the Holy Spirit. I am a child of God. And so are you. So, if you, like me, are hurting so much for something so big that you do not have the strength yet to forgive and have peace, be patient. Pray. Strive. Because if we are children of God, we have the ability and the wisdom to forgive beyond own ability.



The scripture reading from Micah conveys to us God's capacity to forgive us. Micah reminds us that "God pardons sins and forgives the transgression" (Micah 7:18). God does not stay angry forever (Micah 7:18). God will again show compassion, "and hurl[s] all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18). If we believe we are children of God, we can forgive as God forgives. Let us read together the quotation printed in our worship bulletin: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in [us]".



Jesus taught that we should forgive “not seven times, but [as some translations have it, seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Seventy times seven times cannot realistically be directed to one person because that equation equals 539. Yet, 539 is not even the figure Jesus intended to express. Rather, Jesus envisioned a figure that is conceptual rather than numerical: infinity.



Therefore, forgiveness is not a once-off event, it is an ethic that is done continuously. It is a matter of the heart and its nature. And Jesus meant ‘infinity’ because Jesus is “God with us”, Emmanuel, and God can and does forgive infinitely. Even on the cross, while being executed, Jesus forgave.

So friends, make it a life ethic to say “I’m sorry. Forgive me” for the biggest and smallest things. Make it an ethic to strive to forgive others. If you can’t forgive just yet, like me, that’s O.K. As long as you and I desire and pray to move in that direction: toward God.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.