

“Increase Our Faith”
Luke 17:5-10

Pastor Liz Miller
October 2, 2022

When my niece Briley was little, she was really good at telling on her parents. Every time I would talk to her, she would tell me another story about some egregious thing they had done to her. Almost forgot her in a store. Burned dinner. Lost the family cat for several hours. She has pretty outstanding parents which probably made it easier to keep track of the wrongs they committed against her. Every story told mortified her parents and I, as any good Aunt would, amplified their mortification by telling them I was going to write a book called Briley’s Compendium of Life’s Disappointments.

I never wrote the stories down, but I always think of little Briley keeping track of every wrong against her. I’m glad she grew out of this phase because to go through life is to understand that there is always going to be a new experience where someone disappoints you or wrongs you and needs to apologize, and likewise, there is always going to be a new experience where you have disappointed someone or wronged someone and you are the one who needs to apologize. Keeping track is exhausting and can become a barrier to forgiveness. We can become fixated on the wounds - letting them fester instead of finding a way to nurture their way to healing.

This need for forgiveness is the prelude to the scripture story we read today. In the verses just before the disciples beg Jesus to increase their faith, Jesus has offered them a lesson on forgiveness. He tells them, if someone sins against you, you must rebuke them - tell them what they did. But if they repent, if they are sorry, you must forgive them. Even if the same person harms you seven times in one day and says they are sorry seven times, you must forgive them every. single. time.

Seven times in one day? That's a lot. Even my niece would agree it's a bit much. And I imagine that the disciples, in hearing this charge for unending forgiveness, might have been overwhelmed. After all, don't we often couch our words of reconciliation with, "I forgive you, just don't do it again. Don't hurt me again. Don't disappoint me again. Don't come crawling back here the next time you find yourself in hot water." Isn't it reasonable to want to put up limits with each other?

I don't think Jesus means for the disciples, or us, to keep being walked over. Forgiveness is complex and when we water it down we start to hear messages that send people who are being abused back into the homes of their abusers, telling them to give it one more chance. That is not what this is about. A call to forgiveness is not a hall-pass to harm someone. It is not instructions to accept that harm or abuse for yourself. Jesus often talked about power dynamics and when he talks about forgiveness, there must be shared, equal power between people. It is not on the one who is abused to forgive the abuser. It is not on the one who is oppressed to forgive their oppressor.

The context for forgiveness comes in the context of being in right relationship with each other, recognizing that to be human is to let each other down or cause injury to each other, sometimes without even knowing that is what we are doing. The word that Jesus uses for forgive is the Greek word *aphiemi* - meaning to release. To forgive someone is to set them free from your resentment, or your debt - to release them from punishment. The call to forgive again and again, seven times a day, is a call to release each other from building up resentment that impedes our ability to be in relationship together. A call to free someone from the tiny punishments we inflict on each other, knowing that just as we are also human, someone else will need to forgive us, to set us free from the resentment they have built up toward us.

The disciples have heard this call from Jesus. They want to forgive. They want to set each other free. And they aren't sure they are up to the task. Seven times a day? If twelve of them are living in community and each person needs to be forgiven up to seven times every day, that's up to 84 acts of forgiveness each day, 588 "I'm sorries" a week, and 30,576 "It's okay! I release you from my resentment's" each year. Whew.

THIS is the prelude to the disciples declaring, "Jesus! Brother! Increase our faith!" They are not sure they are up to this call to forgiveness and they want more faith to equip them to live well together. In this context, asking for more faith is not a bad thing. It is the disciples recognizing their limitations. It is certainly better than tapping out and saying, "Sorry, Jesus, four is our limit for daily forgiveness. Take it or leave it. We can't do seven"

Jesus responds to the disciples by reassuring them. If all they have is the faith of a tiny mustard seed, that is enough. They do not need any more. A mustard seed worth of faith is enough to uproot a tree and fling it into the sea. What Jesus is reassuring them is that they are enough, just as they are. They do not need to become superhuman or superhero forgivers. They do not need to be something they are not. If all they can do is trust him a tiny amount, or lean into this call to forgive each other again and again just a little bit - if all they can do is try their best - that is enough.

In telling them they only need a mustard seed of faith, Jesus is pointing the disciples away from themselves and back toward God. He reminds them that they are not alone in this work of building and maintaining relationships with one another, God is part of the equation. God is the one who fills in the gaps where their faith ends and forgiveness is called for. God is the one who brings them back together, again and again and again, pointing them toward

forgiveness, pointing them toward love, pointing them toward reconciliation. God is the one who turns a little bit of faith into a force so strong it can uproot trees.

This is not a lesson about how insufficient the disciple's faith is. It's a lesson about how great God is. When we wonder how we are able to find our way back to each other despite the ways we hurt each other and disappoint each other and let each other down? That can only be God's spirit of love. When we wonder how, if all we do is walk around needing forgiveness for the things we've done, how we continue to be the recipient of other people's compassion and kindness? That's God, too.

It's okay if we aren't sure if we have the strength to forgive each other as often as we need to forgive. It's okay if we worry that our resentments outweigh our ability to release each other from punishment. God is at work in the world as a relationship builder, a reconciliation seeker, a facilitator of freedom, freeing each other from the burden of our resentments.

My niece has long outgrown her Compendium of Life's Disappointments, none of which were very disappointing at all, but I suspect someday there will be a point in her life when her parents are not able to be the parents she needs in a crucial moment in time. When they will disappoint her not because of a task they failed to do or a dinner that wasn't to her liking, but in a way that is so painful she has a hard time giving voice to it. Or if not her parents, I suspect there will be a friendship or a romantic relationship in which her vulnerability collides with someone else's flawed humanity and she ends up hurt, surprised at how hurt she is, and wondering if she will ever find her way back to trusting in that relationship.

In those moments, I hope she knows that even as she struggles to find a way forward with that person, she is not alone. I hope she feels the Holy Spirit nudging her toward forgiveness even when she didn't think it was possible, even when she believes the wounds are too deep and

the emotions too raw. I hope she knows that if she has the smallest seed worth of faith that love will prevail, forgiveness is possible, and we can be released from our resentments. God will fill in the gaps and even she will find the strength to uproot trees and fling them into the sea.

I hope my niece knows that, and I hope we know that too. To be in community is to practice forgiveness, because there are going to be times when we are disappointed, when this sacred place is not the place we need it to be, when we let each other down. In those moments, we turn to God and pray that our debts will be forgiven as we forgive our debtors. And when we leave this place, we take our mustard seed of faith with us, seeking right relationships out in the world, in the work place, in our homes, in our families of origin and our chosen families, praying that God will meet us where we are, transforming that tiny seed of faith into a love and forgiveness stronger than we can possibly imagine. May it be so. Amen.