

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**September 13, 2020; 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 14:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. <sup>2</sup> Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's worker? It is for the employer to decide whether the worker has succeeded or failed—and the worker will succeed, for our God has the power to make it so.

<sup>5</sup> Some judge one day to be more sacred than another, while others judge all days to be equally sacred. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. <sup>6</sup> Those who observe special days, do so in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

<sup>7</sup> We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

<sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> For it is written,

"As I live, says the Heavenly Creator, every knee shall bend to me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, **"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.** <sup>23</sup> **"For this reason:**

**The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a ruler who wished to settle accounts with the royal officials. <sup>24</sup> When reckoning was begun, one who owed the crown ten thousand talents was brought in; <sup>25</sup> and, as the debtor could not pay, the ruler ordered this official to be sold, together with family and possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the official knelt in homage, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'** <sup>27</sup> **And out of pity, the ruler released the debtor and forgave what was owed. <sup>28</sup> But that same official, just upon leaving, came upon a colleague who owed the official a hundred denarii; and seizing the debtor by the throat, said, 'Pay what you owe.'** <sup>29</sup> **The debtor fell down and pleaded, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'** <sup>30</sup> **But the official refused; and went and threw the colleague into debtor's prison until payment could be met. <sup>31</sup> When the other court officials saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their ruler all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then the ruler summoned that official and said, 'You worthless wretch! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your**

colleague, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger the ruler handed the official over to be tortured until the debt was paid in full. <sup>35</sup> So our Ruler in heaven will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

SERMON

"Stop Torturing Yourself"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Some say that the universe will keep teaching you a lesson, over and over, until you learn it. So go ahead and learn it, and the universe will stop nagging you with that same circumstance. Have you ever said, "Why does this keep happening to me?" Well, maybe we're supposed to look at that and see if there's a lesson waiting.

Luckily, I'm so advanced spiritually that I'm beyond that. Ha! Some also say that God has a wild sense of humor and loves to mess with us. Let me tell you a story about me, and I wish I could say it happened years ago, but it was last Sunday. Last Sunday, right after I preached about reconciling with our neighbor, and freeing ourselves from angry and negative thoughts. Ha ha!

I was outside loading up the recycling bin with boxes, and a fellow came down the street, I'll say his name was Clem (it wasn't)—and I haven't seen this fellow in years— and we have not always gotten on well. But I pray for him, I do! And suddenly there he is walking down the street next to the church, and says, "Hi, Martin." And I immediately wondered, what did he mean by that? Was that a snide "Hi Martin?" --and my monkey mind was Off to the Races. Luckily, I remembered what I had said to you and myself just an hour before, and annoyingly I had to practice what I preached. So I began to intentionally think lovely thoughts about Clem—although I did not want to. Do you remember that song in *Peter Pan*, "I'm Flying?" In addition to the magic of pixie dust, what the children have to do to fly with Peter Pan is think lovely thoughts, and up they go -- and as soon as I began to think lovely thoughts about Clem, my mind began to soar, and up I went. It really does work! I haven't seen Clem in years, and I have forgiven Clem in the past; but there's a reason why we're called to forgive Seventy Times Seven. It's because it takes Seventy Times Seven times to work at it. It may take Seventy Times Seven Hundred times, but if we don't do it, we will keep torturing ourselves with our little monkey minds that insist we live in a place of resentment or fear, whatever it is that we keep reliving over and over instead of doing the work to move on.

And by the way, who tortures us in that scenario? I know in the parable Jesus told about the ruler and the unforgiving servant, in the end **"the ruler handed the official over to be tortured until the debt was paid in full. <sup>35</sup> So our Ruler in heaven will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** (Matthew 18:34-35) But it isn't a story about the wrath and punishment of God. If it were, it would end with every single person who ever lived being thrown into prison to be tortured. God is the God of mercy and forgiveness. That is the nature of what God is. So God sent Jesus to redeem the world, and all, even those who lived before the historical birth of Jesus, are forgiven—if they accept it, and choose it. We are totally free to refuse this gift, and

if we do, the nature of the universe, which as we've established loves to mess with us, will play out according to the order of creation, which in this case is simple:

If we hang on to our unforgiveness, our own or anyone else's, we are choosing to live in a place of unhappiness and misery—we are tortured. Not by God's capricious condemnation, but because we choose to live that way. The message of the parable is simple. Stop torturing yourself! Choose forgiveness. Even if it takes doing it over and over and over again when you suddenly run into them on the street and you thought you'd already done it. Choose forgiveness again.

If 490 sounds like a lot of prayer time to give to someone we're mad at, we can remember that Jesus was probably being hyperbolic when he said to forgive seven times seventy, but I can offer a literal example of getting pretty close to the top. Years ago, an employer who had been really unpleasant to me for a number of years still occupied a place in my head even after I left that job. I began to realize the folly of still being abused by him even when he was no longer in my life, so I put in him in my daily prayers for forgiveness. At first it felt hollow, rote, and hypocritical, but slowly I got used to praying for him every day, and after about a year, I suddenly realized, to my surprise, that I meant the blessings I prayed for him. My resentments were gone. I think my daily prayers for him took at least 365 times. I don't know whether it was the 360<sup>th</sup> time or the 372<sup>nd</sup> that finally put me over the top, but he no longer lives in my head rent-free. And as the years have gone by, when I do sometimes think of him, my thoughts are charitable. 490 is not a magic number. It's not as though we forgive somebody 489 times and then suddenly that 490<sup>th</sup> is the magic one, or for that matter that we can stop forgiving them on the 491<sup>st</sup> time they step on our toe. If you're being tortured in your heart or your mind, and you want it to stop, you may be willing to say "I forgive you" 4900 times. If you were promised perfect peace in your life if you prayed light toward someone 49,000 times, would you? Well you have been. Stop torturing yourself.

Let me note that this is really hard work. That's why it takes so much repetition. No one is perfect at it, and often someone we've chosen to forgive will suddenly pop back into our resentful minds unbidden. It's natural—forgive yourself first for being a self-righteous judge, and then forgive that jerk one more time. I have to laugh at the reading from Romans 14—and remember that it was the esteemed Apostle Paul who wrote this:

<sup>1</sup> Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

<sup>2</sup> Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

Yeah, Paul, don't judge those weak folks! ☺ They ain't spiritually mature like us.

It's hard, but I don't understand it when I hear a Christian say, "I will never forgive that person." It's not that I don't understand the feeling behind it—I absolutely do. We've all felt that way. What I don't understand is the commitment to not forgiving. I suspect that they're really saying, "I do not believe I can forgive that person." And I understand that, too. It may be an impossible task, or it may seem that way. But nothing is impossible for God. So Jesus, who never asks us to do anything he won't help with, says, "I command you to try." We may not succeed in completely forgiving.

We may not be able to completely let go of resentment. But if we try, 49, or 490 times, I guarantee that it will make a difference. We will move forward just a little bit further out of the imprisonment of resentment, and into the freedom of the light.

Psalms 114 is a hymn that celebrates the limitless power of the Divine Lord, who holds sway over all that is. Its context is remembering the joy of the whole of creation as Yahweh delivered the people from their slavery:

<sup>1</sup> When Israel went out from Egypt,  
the house of our ancestors from a people of strange language,

<sup>2</sup> Judah became God's sanctuary,  
Israel God's domain.

<sup>3</sup> The sea looked and fled;  
the Jordan turned back on its course.

<sup>4</sup> The mountains skipped like rams,  
the hills like lambs.

<sup>5</sup> Why is it, O sea, that you flee?  
O Jordan, that you turn back?

<sup>6</sup> O mountains, that you skip like rams?  
O hills, like lambs?

<sup>7</sup> Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,  
at the presence of the God of Israel,

<sup>8</sup> who turns the rock into a pool of water,  
the flint into a spring of water.

Psalms 114:1-8

As Israel is freed from chains in Egypt, the psalm remembers the parting of the waters in the daring escape, saying that before God's mighty dominion, "the sea looked and fled... the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs," all of earth trembling at the presence of the Almighty, who chose us for deliverance. (vss.3-7) Drawing further on the imagery of the Exodus from Egypt, the poem sings that all earth trembles "at the presence of the God...who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water." (vss.7-8) I got to thinking that the power of God in Christ, who calls us to such radical forgiveness— "as far as the east is from the west, so far does the LORD remove our transgressions from us. Psalms 103:12 —that our inability to let go our anger and resentment, our preconceived sense of "rightness," which equals self-righteousness, is like having hearts of stone—but God can turn rocks into pools of water, springing forth to quench our thirst for love.

The purpose of forgiving, both for those we forgive, for us and for God, is to bring us into peace and connection with each other. Lack of forgiveness or any judgment is a barrier between the three of us, my neighbor, God, and myself. As such, the definition of forgiveness is Peace. And what do we get when we create peace? Peace!

The world tends to think that forgiveness is only about a wrong a neighbor has done us. But we broaden the concept. It has to do with anything we think is wrong that is affecting us to the point where it's in our head as a resentment. We can resent

people, places, and things. I can be mad that I ran over a nail and my car got a flat tire and I lost a half a day getting it fixed and it cost \$200. But if that ruins my day today, and tomorrow I begin to ruminate on how unpleasant it was, that nail needs forgiveness. If I don't forgive, I will live in a form of torture. Who or What is in our head that isn't peace? Circumstances need forgiveness sometimes, too. Recovering alcoholics say:

Acceptance is the answer to *all* my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

(Alcoholics Anonymous, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc., 1976, p. 449)

Remember, though, that acceptance of life's challenges isn't the same thing as acquiescing to wrongs that need to be addressed and fixed. When I'm being hurt, or my neighbor is, it is right to be angry about it. Healthy anger is a gift from God when it propels us to change what's needed. The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote what is called the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

And by the way, while you're busy forgiving everyone and everything else, don't forget to forgive yourself. Like the Serenity Prayer acknowledges, there are plenty of things we all need to work on in ourselves, but if we don't forgive ourselves for our imperfections, we're continuing to torture ourselves in a way we would never treat someone we love. This is often the hardest forgiveness. Honestly facing our faults, doing what we can about them, and loving ourselves anyway. It takes even more than seventy times seven for ourselves, because wherever we go, there we are again. I suspect I'll need to keep at it every day, seventy times seven, times seven billion thoughts of peace and forgiveness.

The How of all this is something I struggled with for years. Yes, thoughts and prayers matter. They're real. They do work, slowly, and we have to trust the process even when it doesn't feel like anything is happening. But how about some action? Do something nice for someone you're mad at. Or the circumstance. Have you ever given a gift to a charity you don't care about because a friend cares about it? Maybe do that for something you're mad at. It all adds up. Imagine building a house of forgiveness and peace, one prayer, one action at a time, building blocks of peace—and you get to live there! And when you spend all day building your structure of love, and you run into Hilda who gossips about you at the grocery, and you realize you are still angry, don't beat yourself up. The house isn't finished. Build another piece. Your structure won't be complete till heaven. Jesus is building a mansion for you, he says in John 14.

But we can begin to live in that mansion now. You want a description of what forgiveness looks like in the here and now? Again from my friends the recovering alcoholics:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.

(Alcoholics Anonymous, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., New York City, 1976, pp. 83-84. Originally published 1939)

Amen.