

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, February 28, 2016
How Many Times?

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you.” (Psalm 63: 1a) What might it mean for each of us to claim God for ourselves just as David does in today’s 63rd Psalm? I do not mean this in the way that some professional athletes might mean when they praise God for their performance, or when they attribute a victory to God. I mean that we claim God as our own, when we feel so connected to God’s presence that God is no longer a mysterious and distant energy or force, but rather we hold God intimately in our hearts as somehow uniquely our God.

“My soul thirsts for you?” Most of us likely have never had an overwhelming thirst or need for water. Water is so readily available to us. What circumstances have you experienced in your lives of deep physical thirst? Running in a marathon? Over-exertion? Being out in the sun for too long. The psalmist today, invites us to relate these experiences of thirst to our soul thirsting for God.

In her commentary on this text, Lindsay P. Armstrong speaks of the big appetites of Americans. *“America loves big. Whatever our income, we love big sales, salaries, vacations, accomplishments, and portfolios...Yet in the midst of this celebration of size, our appetite for God can seem paltry. While we may steadily save for retirement or vacation, do we seek God with the same regularity, intensity, and focus? Our gusto for God can be remarkably small, particularly when contrasted with the joy and delight in God that we discover in the Psalms.”*¹ May our appetite, our thirst and our gusto for God increase this Lenten season as we meditate on the Psalms. May our appetite, our thirst and our gusto for God increase this Lenten season as we explore together our need for forgiveness – forgiveness of those who have harmed us, forgiveness that we seek from those whom we have harmed, and forgiveness that we seek for ourselves - from the God whom we claim as ours - for our shortcomings and failures.

Today’s New Testament Text begins with these most challenging words: *“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”* I know that I was brought up with the interpretation of this text as not seventy-seven times but seventy times seven times. The interpretation does not matter since the meaning of Jesus is that we called to forgive always.

Peter thought that his offer to forgive someone seven times was an extravagant offer. We can only imagine Peter mumbling to himself, “How many times? How many times did you say I must forgive? I thought seven times was extravagant, now you give me a number that

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

is too many times to imagine. Are you really saying that no matter how many times someone offends me, I must always forgive?"

In her commentary on this text Kathryn D. Blanchard says, "*Peter makes explicit the perennial question that plagues all Christians in all times and places: When may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus' answer—whether translated "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven"—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise.*"²

Our New Testament text continues with the parable of the unforgiving servant. It can be summarized thusly: one servant was forgiven a humungous debt; that same servant immediately went out and would not forgive a miniscule debt owed him, the whistle blower in the community reported this outrage, so the original servant was tortured after all. The text concludes with these words: "*So God in heaven will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" The message of this parable is that it is simply unacceptable to God that we not be about the business of forgiveness in our lives.

Marjorie J. Thompson, in her book, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, says, "*Normal human feelings can easily block our acting on the knowledge that forgiveness is imperative for followers of Christ.*"³ Thompson gives us some tools for dealing with two types of resistance. The first type is: *'I should but I don't want to and (2) 'I can't yet.'*⁴ Thompson suggests that when you don't want to forgive someone, the ego is often involved. She suggests that to overcome the control of the ego one must turn to God in order to see a larger view of the circumstances. I suggest that turning to God also requires that we shift from "I don't want to" to "I am willing to try." Some of the tools we discussed the last two weeks may be useful such as prayer and meditation and "letting go of the hope that the past will get better". Thompson adds that when we can turn our hurt over to God, the possibility exists that the situation may lead to an even better outcome. It often requires that we let go of fear and uncertainty.

In regard to "I can't yet", Thompson gives the following insights: "*Serious offenses against the humanity of a person involving physical or psychological trauma cannot be forgiven quickly. When we are deeply wounded by betrayal or violence, it will take time, perhaps a long time, before sufficient inner healing prepares the soil of our hearts to nurture the fruit of forgiveness.*"⁵ I find myself drawn to Thompson's image of forgiveness as a fruit that requires us first to prepare the soil, second to plant the seed and third, to nurture the growth of the seed of forgiveness until it becomes a fruit-bearing tree. There are

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

³ *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, by Marjorie J. Thompson; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press. pg 47

⁴ *Ibid.* pg 48

⁵ *Ibid.* pg 51

circumstances when our humanness cries out, “I can’t yet”. Yet, again a shift in our attitude is required. Maybe the shift is “It will take time and while it is taking time we will claim God as ours, and we will plant and nurture the seed of forgiveness until it can bear fruit.

Last week we heard Jesus say that we should love our enemies and love those who persecute us. Similarly, this week Jesus calls us to always forgive someone who offends us repeatedly. I must confess, that I find this is where my simple definition of “forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past will get better” comes up short. When the offense is in the past, yes, I can imagine “giving up the hope that the past will get better”, but when the person who I perceive as harming me continues to offend me repeatedly, it is now in the present and seems likely to continue into the future. Also, if, as Thompson suggests, the offense involves physical or psychological trauma, “giving up the hope that the past will get better” comes up short.

I proclaim to you this week as I did last week, the forgiveness that Jesus seemingly demands of us simply is not humanly possible. In addition to turning to God, we also need to turn to the support of our community of faith.

Our need to turn to God and to our faith community is why I began today’s message exploring Psalm 63. We need to claim God as ours, we need to increase our hunger, to increase our thirst, to increase our gusto for God. Only when our soul thirsts for God beyond the greatest thirst we can imagine, will God then be able to bring our souls to bear the fruit of forgiveness. Only when our soul thirsts for God beyond the greatest thirst we can imagine will we be able to forgive always. Only when our soul thirsts for God beyond the greatest thirst we can imagine will we be able to forgive as God has forgiven us. May it be so. Amen.