

I AND THOU: 5 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAITH AND RELATIONSHIPS

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR: WEEK THREE

At the time, there was a debate amongst rabbis – was there a greatest commandment? Or were they all equal? They asked Jesus to try to trip him up, but instead of choosing one, Jesus chose two: The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” But he added Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Everything else, he seemed to say, were ways of fulfilling these first two.

We like to think our time is different from Jesus’ – and, of course, it is. But his was, in many ways, a time more ruled by oppression and hierarchy and violence. So during these last five weeks of Lent, small groups will gather to discuss how these two commandments might still be precisely what we need to trust one another in this increasingly divided and divisive time.

During each week, your small group will meet for a fun and meaningful time of debriefing on the topic at hand. What follows in these pages is a simple format to help you organize your small group time. Anyone can be the “Leader” at any time. Assign one person to be the Leader each week or just go round-robin every week, changing voices each time the “Leader” part comes up.

THE
FIRST CHURCH UCC
LENT 2023

How-to:

1. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week’s sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
2. **Resist the urge** to focus on “what you will get” from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
3. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other’s trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that’s okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, “Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”
4. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of the sacred), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

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SCRIPTURES:

Reproving Another Who Sins

¹⁵ "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

–Matthew 18:15-22

REV. NEIL'S SERMON AND REFLECTIONS:

"We are not the spouse forgiving the abuser day after day, week after week. The Bible wants repentance. Change your ways. The Bible is about transforming human lives and human relationships, not putting up with crap."

"It has been widely noted that the primary beneficiary of the gift of forgiveness is the person who has been harmed and is now able to let go of animosity and hostility. The physical and emotional benefits are well-established by scientific studies. Offering forgiveness reduces one's level of stress, lowers one's blood pressure, and contributes to one's overall well-being. For persons with a strong religious or spiritual worldview, granting the gift of forgiveness can feel like a victory for one's values and beliefs. It can enhance one's self-esteem, and can be extended toward self-forgiveness, as we are aware of our own mistakes."

"The gift of forgiveness may also strengthen and restore the larger social context. In situations where a larger social group is involved, the forgiveness of the person who is harmed may encourage a wider reconciliation."

"If you are in a situation or a relationship where forgiveness is a bridge too far in this moment – consider a deep level of acceptance for the reality of your past experience. [...] Every second that is previous to this moment right now is something I cannot change... if I am going to have a sense of serenity or wholeness in my day to day, I need to be able to accept that what happened happened."

Steps to forgiveness, based on several compiled sources:

1. The Uncovering Phase: Identify the harm. What is it, exactly that needs to be forgiven? How many degrees of separation are there between the harm and the person who experiences the harm? (My daughter is injured, then the harm is directly to her, and my harm is secondary – yet very real and important) This is the telling the story – where, what, by whom, how and under what circumstances.
2. Naming the hurt: Identify the feelings and emotions that are results of that harm. Is it physical injury? Emotional pain? Shame, anger, anxiety? Loss of other relationships? Grief? Do a deep evaluation – are you ready and able? Is this the time for forgiveness?
3. Reflection, evaluation: What is the response of the offender? Are they alive and capable of offering remorse? If they are repentant then the path of granting forgiveness may be more easily traveled. Tutu suggests "reframing the wrongdoer" in ways that recognize the victim and perpetrator share a common humanity. By accepting our own flaws and imperfections, we may be able to extend the grace or gift of forgiveness to the one who has caused us harm.
4. Decision phase: The gift of forgiveness is exactly that, a gift. To forgive is to renounce one's claim to bitterness, resentment and retaliation. It is an offering of the heart, mind and soul that sets the offender free from one's desire for revenge or one's hatred and hope for harm to befall.
5. Outcome phase – renewing or releasing the relationship: The ultimate goal is reconciliation of the relationship in the cases where that is an appropriate goal. Clearly there are cases when the renewing of the relationship is not possible or appropriate – in these instances, the Tutus recommend the release

of the relationship. 'Releasing is refusing to let an experience or person occupy space in your head or heart any longer,' (TBOF, 155). As the relationship is released, the person surrenders their hold on bitterness or hatred toward the one whom they have released. Where do you envision your relationship with the offender to be heading? What are your options? What would maximize your sense of wholeness?

A Path for the Wrongdoer, according to the Tutus:

1. Admit the wrong: this is how we take responsibility for harming another human being.
2. Witness the anguish: persons who are wronged deserve to have their experience and emotions heard and acknowledged. The role of the wrongdoer is to listen deeply, without comment or self-justification.
3. Apologize: If forgiveness is not given, the perpetrator needs to accept that decision
4. Renew or release the relationship: If forgiveness is granted, and the person who is harmed is open to renewal, that opportunity calls for the committed effort of the wrongdoer. A renewed relationship remembers the wrong and makes every effort to avoid the harmful behaviors of the past.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. What questions do you have about the reading?
2. In the first part of our look at forgiveness, we are looking primarily at interpersonal relationships. Is there a relationship, like the one Rev. Neil described, where you have received or given deep forgiveness?
3. C. S. Lewis found that forgiveness was not as simple as it sounds: "I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me....I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me....Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances....that [real forgiveness] we can always have from God if we ask for it," (*On Forgiveness*).
 - a. Lewis' quote implies that it is impossible to forgive without loving, or to love without being willing to forgive. Do you agree?
 - b. Are there places in your life where this is more evident?
4. Which of the steps of forgiveness is the hardest for you? Why?
5. Is there someone you need to forgive? Something for which you need to be forgiven?
6. Rev. Neil's observation that "Every second that is previous to this moment right now is something I cannot change" is both simple and profound. What, in the past, is keeping you from serenity and wholeness? What are the next steps in working toward acceptance?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER:

Start by reading numbers 2-4 on the first page, (remember to be honest and open with one another!). Then choose a few of these questions to direct your time together.

1. Look at question three, above. How do you understand the relationship between love and forgiveness?
2. In your experience, who is the primary beneficiary of forgiveness? The one being forgiven, or the one forgiving? Which is harder for you?
3. What is the relationship between understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness? Are they the same? Different?
4. "The Bible wants repentance. Change your ways. The Bible is about transforming lives and human relationships, not putting up with crap." How do you tell the difference? How do the steps of forgiveness help you tell the difference?
5. This series is aimed, in the end, at helping us trust our neighbors again, and return to right relationship. How is forgiveness a part of that journey, in your understanding? Go through the steps: What is the action that needs to be forgiven? Who was harmed? What are the emotions? How do you understand the actions of the wrong-doers? (Is there any way that you are the wrong-doer?) What is your decision? Hoped for outcome?
6. In what way are the observations in the questions above relevant to our conversation about learning to trust our neighbors – locally and nationally?
 - a. How does the relationship between love and forgiveness apply to these larger, communal settings?
7. Discuss last week's challenge. How did you feel after? What did you learn?

Finish by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down. Keep them confidential. Pray over them for each other during the upcoming week.

Closing Prayer (feel free to say your own!): **Holy One, Merciful God, make yourself known to us, Be present with us in this often troubled journey of life. Create in us hearts that are open to transformation. Give us the patience of practice in this Lent season— Ordering our speech with blessing, And ordering our days with time enough for you. Amen.**

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Dive deeply into question 6 in the personal reflection section, above. Where is acceptance necessary? Spend time each day praying or meditating, asking God to help you move into acceptance of what is past, and to bring you into wholeness. If it is helpful, pray the original serenity prayer (below), by beloved Congregational minister, Reinhold Niebuhr.

God, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other. Amen.