

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday September 6, 2026 Proper 18A
Text: Matthew 18:15-20
Theme: All is Forgiven

Today's Gospel lesson is a challenging one and important teaching centered on the practice of reconciliation. Each of us has a soft spot for stories of forgiveness.

The day Paco runs away from home is a humid one. He and his father have been fighting again. No one knows for sure whether he is actually running away or if he has been kicked out of his home, but either way Paco finds himself on the hot streets of Madrid, wandering and alone.

His plan is to become a bullfighter, a profession that will most likely get him killed, but this is his only idea and, quite frankly, his only hope. Those who train under a mentor have a good chance of surviving this profession, but Paco has no money for a mentor. He has only his memory, and it is filled with mistakes and guilt and regret.

The days with his father have been hard and their conflict noisy. What Paco said or did we cannot know – we only see him wandering, low-shouldered with sadness and sorrow. He wears the heavy coat of his own shame.

Paco's plan to be a matador is a one-way street toward suicide, and this is the last thing his father wants.

Forlorn, his father tries something that he desperately hopes will work. Since there is little to no chance he will be able to find Paco

wandering the streets of Madrid, he puts an advertisement in the newspaper.

The advertisement reads ~ “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa.”

When his father goes to the Hotel Montaña the next day at noon, he is flabbergasted to find eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers ~ waiting for the forgiveness they never thought possible. (this story is adapted from a story told by Ernest Hemmingway.)

Everyone desires forgiveness. It is remarkable irony that the gift everyone wants and needs is one of the hardest gifts to give.

We are deeply attracted to stories of reconciliation, of warring factions making peace, of estranged family members reuniting, of friendships being rekindled after betrayal, or of marriages being repaired after separation. It’s in the spiritual DNA of our human longing for connection and harmony.

But sometimes we struggle to make peace with those we’ve hurt or offended or been hurt or offended by. So, Jesus’ teaching about reconciliation in church can hit awfully close to home. Sometimes the bible seems to meddle in our lives, it convicts us and instead of us reading it, it reads us, challenging us to live differently than we are tempted to live or taught to live by those around us. As someone once told me, “It’s not the parts of the bible that I don’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts of the bible that I do understand that bother me most.”

Our website reads:

The things we really desire cannot be bought but must be lovingly crafted through relationships. Together we are blessed to be making something beautiful for God in our neighborhood.

I really like what this says about being church together. I believe that we need each other to grow in loving relationship with God in Christ. It matters to our spiritual lives to have a spiritual home, a faith community that we belong to and invest ourselves in. The quality of our lives is shaped, enriched and changed by our shared practices here in this place.

I like to describe St. Mark's as a practicing congregation. We know we don't always get it right. But we are a place and a people that are trying to become a community, and that is something so many people lack and desire and wonder where to find. We are practicing growing in intimacy with God through our worship, our prayer, our relationships, our service, and our learning. We want to be a church where all who enter our doors are welcomed as Christ, and so we practice hospitality and encourage one another to be open to the newcomer or simply to the person they haven't yet met.

In today's readings, Paul tells us to love one another and Jesus is giving us a roadmap for working out conflicts. Both are exhorting us to focus on the quality of our relationships here in this place as one of the most important fruits of our spiritual life. The degree to which we love each other, work out our conflicts by talking things through and treat people with a deep respect and kindness is at the

core of what it means to be a faith community. Reconciliation is meant to be at the core of our community because that is at the core of who Jesus is for us and for the world.

Being the church, building a community where love can grow is challenging, because well the church consists of people, and to be perfectly honest people like us can sometimes be well, difficult. Jesus is basically telling us that part of being human is having some conflict with one another. The good news is that Jesus considers the reconciling nature of the church to be so important that he gives the disciples some advice about how to repair their life together when things go awry.

The teaching of Jesus found in Matthew's gospel reads a bit strangely, like some sort of bare bones instruction manual for reconciliation. While the procedures may seem a bit sketchy to our modern technical ways of thinking, that is how guidelines operate. They are fleshed out and built up through our own experience of living in community.

Not surprisingly the first step is to take the high road and sit down one-to-one and try to resolve the issue. Talk it out, try to understand one another, seek reconciliation with your brother or sister, sibling in Christ. Since repentance and forgiveness are part and parcel of the Christian life this is what both parties are made for and reconciliation brings joy back to the community. The scriptures assume that there will be a deep desire to reconcile with one another, to seek to understand each other and to be willing to joyfully acknowledge our fault and grow and learn from one another. There is nothing that brings God more joy than to see his

own beloved children restoring relationships. This requires a kind of kingdom vision, a view of the world that sees that healthy relationships and the ability to work out our differences demonstrates the power of Christ working within us. To talk directly to one another about an offense or a slight requires a great deal of courage and spiritual maturity as well as a willingness to be humble and to admit of one's own part in the conflict or the offense.

As someone with a lot of experience of faith communities, the church is a much healthier place when people of faith decide to embrace this one piece of advice. When you are hurt or offended, go and speak to the person directly, tell them honestly and kindly what it is that has hurt or offended or injured you. Avoid triangulation: talking to others about the problem instead of the actual person you are having trouble with. Dare to have a real conversation about what has transpired. Dare to engage in the intimacy of reconciliation. Don't go tell someone else about what a terrible thing so and so has done to you. Don't smear the character or impugn the person you have been hurt by. Go right to the source of the hurt and have the spiritual courage to confront your own shadow in the process. This is world-changing advice especially when it is done in love. And if you are having difficulty with the conversation, Jesus tells his followers to find some wise and attentive help, some loving counsel, faithful and gentle friends to assist.

Forgiveness is a spiritual practice, Paco's father is ready to practice forgiveness and restore his relationship, so he writes a letter of forgiveness, short and direct, five simple words: "All is

forgiven. Love, Papa.” This is not all the work but the most important beginning.

Unforgiveness is also a practice, one that can be honed and perfected like any other. We can all get better at both forgiving or unforgiving ~ it just depends on which one we practice more.

But ~ if you are interested in devoting much of your life to perfecting the practice of unforgiveness, it can be done. There are action steps. Here are a few:

~ Be careful to harbor your offenses well. Plant them deep into yourself and water them every day. Wish your enemy ill in your heart, making sure you play and replay the offense to yourself constantly.

~ Read and reread cruel emails or text messages and let your anger grow with each reading. Never delete them. Keep all your mean texts too and reread them often. Never starve your anger of its necessary fuel.

~ Repeat the offense over and over, and be careful to always speak in hyperbole. Exaggerate the story in your mind every day, making it bigger and bigger with each telling. Never let a day pass where you don’t retell it to yourself and others.

~ Punish those who have hurt you, every day if you can. Never let them off the hook, ever.

~ Make sure you convince yourself that you are totally innocent and the offender is totally at fault. That you have never done such a thing to anyone nor thought it.

~ Always place yourself in God's position ~ always try to change, correct, and punish the one you feel has wronged you. This will ensure that you never forgive and never ever forget, which is what you are choosing.

It is actually quite easy to become an expert in the practice of unforgiveness. Lots of humans have perfected it.

However, that is not what Jesus is calling his followers into. Jesus calls us into the practice of forgiveness.

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.
Matt. 18:18.

The teaching of Jesus reminds us of something very powerful. As children of God and followers of Jesus we are mediators of the flow between heaven and earth. We do not have to collapse into the ways of the world around us, the ways of alienation and division, of enmity and strife. We are a part of a new humanity which invites us into a new way of being together. To be a disciple is to be dedicated to practicing the art of forgiveness.

If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. Matt. 18:19

Heaven's agenda is for two disciples on earth who were at odds, to be reconciled. This is actually how heaven comes to earth. When people in a conflict pray for reconciliation, they are asking for the heavenly power, the spiritual strength of God's love to energize them in order to bring forgiveness about. Prayer opens the heart to the God and God's desire is for his beloved children to live in peace and harmony. This passage is not saying that reconciliation is easy or that if you just pray about it, things happen. But it is saying that our disagreements and conflicts are opportunities to manifest God's love in reconciling and forgiving one another. Our inner attitudes toward one another in our conflicts and injuries are to be informed by the truth that we are God's beloved. We are followers of Jesus. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself the scriptures proclaim. So in us Christ is at work reconciling us to those with whom we are alienated or estranged.

What if it were our goal to be the first to make an overture of reconciliation? We all know what this means, often it doesn't take much to mend a relationship, only a smallest turn back toward the other, the smallest of apologies, the slightest admission of a mistake and the floodgates of forgiveness begin to open. I was being a jerk. It was petty of me, I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me but I was a perfect monster, please forgive me. I'm sorry I said those things, I didn't mean them will you forgive me.

No one is saying that the Christian life is easy. It is decidedly not easy. But it is the way that leads to life, life abundant.

Are we practicing forgiveness as a community? Are we allowing love to grow by keeping our relationships healthy? I think the answer is yes and if Jesus is right there will be more opportunities.

There is a playful song by John Prine that I like to remember when thinking about the necessity of being a forgiving people: It goes like this,

*Father forgive us for what we must do
You forgive us and we'll forgive You
We'll forgive each other till we both turn blue
Then we'll whistle and go fishing in Heaven*
~ John Prine, Whistle and Fish

May we forgive each other till we both turn blue.

All is forgiven, love papa

Note: I'm deeply grateful for the commentary of John Shea on this passage and for the retelling of Hemmingway's story on the blog roll the boulder by Shari Ray (I had read the story many years ago in a youth ministry book but did not know where to find it). I also really love the John Prine song which is quoted in this sermon which I was first made aware of by Dr. Michael Floyd in a sermon preached long ago at The Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest during a weekday chapel.