

Forgiveness 2: Seventy Times Seven - *The Harm of Exclusion and Marginalization; Building Communities of God's Inclusion; Practices of Forgiveness that invite us forward*
Matthew 18:21–22; Luke 23:34; Colossians 3:12–13

June 28, 2026

Rev. Joretta Marshall

Last week you heard a beautiful reminder about the importance of forgiveness in our walk with God. I am grateful to Pastor Tami for the carefulness of her message. It is worth going back to listen to the recording. Forgiveness is, indeed, central to the stories of the Scriptures.

The Scriptures – both Hebrew or Old Testament and New Testament – are filled with reminders that God's Spirit is present not just in individuals, but also in community. The particular verses read for today focus on the ways in which forgiveness is not simply an individual practice but also point to God's work in community. Developing the kind of community that fosters God's grace through practices of forgiveness is just one of the gifts of God. This morning I want to unpack this connection of forgiveness to community, especially in light of the challenges and harm caused by systemic marginalization and injustice.

Like many of you, June 2026 seems to be hitting my spirit in conflicting ways. On the one hand, we continue to be confronted with daily challenges – wars that never seem to cease, illnesses that last too long or that take life with them, suffering that seems senseless in the larger schemes of God's hopes for the world, and so much more. At the same time, June 2026 has been marked by public celebrations that remind us of change and possibility.

- For example, many Annual Conferences in the United Methodist Church celebrated the 70th Anniversary of the ordination of women this year. This seems particularly celebratory for Messiah as you experience the gifts and graces of two strong women pastors who would not have been ordained 70 years ago.
- This month our family went to see a play at the Guthrie and along with the reminder to silence our devices, we were also reminded once again that the land on which the Guthrie sits and the land on which we worship in Golden Valley and in Plymouth, was stewarded for centuries by indigenous communities who valued the world God had given, and whose rights were taken away by force.
- This is also Pride month around the world. In fact, the Twin Cities Pride events are happening in and around Loring Park in Minneapolis this weekend. Pride events celebrate the gifts and joys of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer people in the world. They remind us that we have come through some hard times and yet we are still alive and can celebrate who we are.
- On June 19th (Juneteenth as it is commonly known) we remembered the arrival of troops in Galveston, TX, two years after freedom was proclaimed for enslaved

people. Yet, two years after the proclamation, black people were still being held captive by enslavers in Texas and other places. It took the force of a military arrival to assert that all people were to live free.

What is true about every one of these events is that they are celebrations in response to experiences of oppression. Women were not always affirmed in pastoral leadership; in fact, they are still prevented from ordination in several denominations. Even in denominations like the United Methodist Church there is a disparity in some places between women and men when it comes to salary levels and appointments in churches. The atrocities that occurred to Indigenous peoples and tribes at the hands of white expansion left legacies of harm and violence that continue to this day. Those who are Indigenous, African American, Asian American, Latino/Latina still live with higher rates of poverty, a lack of resources, laws that do not promote well-being, a fear of incarceration, and so much more. Families, friends, and allies who celebrate LGBTQ+ people do so knowing that if you are a family with a trans child or an LGBTQ+ youth or if you are part of a couple who self-identify as lesbian or gay, the world is still – quite literally – a dangerous place. Legislation that seeks to restrict and even to eradicate the lives of LGBTQ+ people continues to emerge. And, while Juneteenth is certainly something to celebrate, we are wise to remember the ongoing harm of racism in our culture today. The past is not just the past.

Every one of the celebrations this month reminds us of at least two things: First, a tremendous amount of work has been done to create a world that is more in alignment with God's kin-dom – and that is worth celebrating. But alongside this good news rests a second truth: the sins and failures of the past continue to live in the present, especially when those failures are systematic and systemic. The legacies of marginalization and oppression are long, and they have an impact on generation after generation.

Systemic injustices are those laws, attitudes, and ways of being that support and enhance some in our world while diminishing and harming others. Those targeted for discrimination are often excluded from more beneficial support, or at the very least they are marginalized and tolerated as long as they stay in their rightful place. And often the reason for exclusion rests in our embodied differences of gender, race, sexuality, or other aspects of our very identity. Marginalization suggests that some ways of being in the world are better, or more "natural" than other ways, proposing that not everyone is equally created in the image of God. As Christians we know just the opposite is true: **Everyone** is created in the image of God.

For example, we hear in our culture that some people are naturally prone to deceit, leading some to suggest that they should not be trusted because of the country from which they originate, or the accent they carry in their conversations with us. We do not necessarily mean to be un-Christ-like toward them, but if only "they" would be more like "us" we believe somehow the world would be better – because it is better for "us." The majority often sets up rules of conduct or laws that keep "others" in their "rightful places." Such barriers – in rules and in attitudes – make it hard for "others" to thrive in a world not set

up for them. Accessing rights becomes dangerous and feeding children or keeping housing or making a living wage becomes a daily chore.

Brown and black people are often judged first on the color of their skin; immigrants and migrants are constantly reminded they don't speak English well enough. Indigenous communities have to survive systems where there are fewer services, higher rates of poverty and disease, and fewer resources to confront the challenges. Gay couples have to worry about whether they will be allowed in hospital rooms if one of them is ill or whether their children will be taken from them, and parents of non-binary teens worry about how to get adequate medical care in the midst of transitions that others do not understand. And, when we don't understand things, we tend to try to keep those who live these experiences of difference on the margins of our lives.

The attitudes and structures that support the marginalization of groups of people are so ingrained in our culture that we fall into behaviors without even being aware that we are stomping on someone's God-given Spirit. We fall into unconscious patterns of supporting some while thinking others are not part of the center of God's love. Such behaviors and attitudes destroy – rather than build up – the community of God's people. The sentiment of Jesus from the cross reminds us that sometimes we do not know what we are doing when we participate unwittingly in the marginalization or harm of others, and we must seek the path of forgiveness.

Forgiveness and the building of communities

Forgiveness is invited into the room when we face broken hearts and broken lives as a result not just of individual harm, but because of collective and communal harm. Forgiveness is God's invitation to work toward restoring relationships and finding ways to be part of the arc of history that moves us toward deeper justice, greater wellbeing for all, and a recognition that God's love extends to everyone.

Forgiveness is not about denying past wrongs; rather forgiveness is a process that sometimes takes years to move through. Perhaps Jesus' encouragement to forgive seventy times seven times has less to do with an accurate accounting of the times you have been a recipient or an initiator of forgiveness; perhaps instead it serves as a reminder that forgiveness can sometimes be a long and arduous journey. Part of the challenge of forgiveness is that we make new mistakes even as we try to restore right relationships with our neighbors in Christ. So, while racism has been part of the history of the United States since the white settlers arrived on the continent, we know that its harm has been felt in generations and continues to the present. The work of righting the wrongs requires constant and consistent work by all of us. Yet, we do the work because we believe deeply that God intends for the world to be a place where people and the earth thrive, rather than a place of diminishment.

Forgiveness is not about "owing" someone something; rather, forgiveness is reaching out to mitigate harm that has been caused in the past and that hangs on in the present. Forgiveness grants us the privilege of knowing that God is doing a new thing, even while

we are working on behaviors and attitudes that are buried deep in our communities. Rather than beginning from the point of suspicion toward those who are different, doing the long-term work of forgiveness can help us learn to celebrate our differences and trust God's creative imagination. Actively valuing communities of inclusion and diversity includes the promotion of attitudes and graces that see all of humanity as part of God's world. In so doing, we begin to see our own biases and work to re-shape them into deeper connection with God's vision. And, while diverse communities also point to places of disagreements and conflict, we trust that sitting with one another at the table in small ways can illuminate a God who is bigger than we can imagine and whose very creation is so diverse that we are awestruck by its varied colors and textures and ways of being.

Communities of faith are called to be places that fan the flames of hope and that build structures and policies to encourage curiosity and the flourishing of one another. The goal of forgiveness is not necessarily the forgiveness itself; rather it is that forgiveness leads to the restoration of the kinds of relationships that God wants for this world. These are relationships of honesty, integrity, justice, and love. Communities are stronger when they support the flourishing of differences rather than trying to ignore diversity or wish that all people were more like us. Churches – communities of faith – ought to be places where people can step inside and immediately know they are welcomed for who they are. There ought to be no question about the valuing of difference. God's world is diverse and our churches can reflect the goodness of that diversity if we work on it together.

Last week Pastor Tami left you with some practices that foster forgiveness. Let me support that list with four ways of being that help us address injustices that are long-standing and that continue with every generation.

- 1) ***Truth-telling about past and present:*** Forgiveness is a process, not a one-time action. There are many steps in the process, and telling truths about our collective past and present is essential. God appreciates truth-telling, reminding us that we are not held hostage for wrongs done. God does not ignore our wrong-doing or the ways that we have unintentionally or intentionally harmed one another. God also does not hold us hostage for our wrongs but invites us into processes that promote healing and that seek to restore our relationships and our communal soul. To tell the truth about the ways that people are kept on the margins also often requires us to be truthful about our own place and participation in the harm done against groups of people. Being honest about how racism or sexism or heterosexism has shaped our perspectives about life is one step in healing relationships. We must be willing to speak and receive the kind of truth that leads us to change our own behaviors as a way of working on relationships of grace.
- 2) ***Accountability and Apologies:*** Apologies are important, but they must be genuine about our regret and the work we will do to change the kind of behavior or attitudes that negatively impact our relationships with one another. We are living in divisive times in community, when the desire for revenge tends to crowd out the more authentic movements toward building strong and faithful community. Denying

responsibility or seeking revenge does not help people trust in our capacity to relate to them in new ways. Even though the original harm occurred in generations past, we are called by God to be faithful to changing the world by changing attitudes and behaviors that keep people on the margins. After all, 77 times or 70 times seven points to the depth of God's grace in meeting the challenges of accountability and apology. We will make mistakes with one another, intentionally or unintentionally. God reminds us, however, that grace is abundant and never-ending. If the arc of history is long and it bends toward justice, we know that speaking truth to one another and ourselves, restoring relationships, and tending to the harms of the past and present takes time and persistence. In this way, we hold ourselves accountable.

- 3) **Compassion for self and others:** The writer of Colossians reminds us of some of the attitudes we need to carry in our forgiveness work. "Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other . . ." The qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience are to be cultivated in our everyday relationships. We need to be reminded that we are forgiven and forgiving people. We draw on these qualities to keep ourselves honest, to motivate us to develop strong and healthy community, and to do the work of forgiveness. The work of forgiveness can be long and arduous, and we are called to remain steadfast in the practices that foster good relationships. We are to be compassionate with ourselves and with one another.
- 4) **Prayer:** At times I know that facing truth or doing the hard work of making amends is more than I can accomplish on my own. Sometimes the harm has been deep or the pain long-lasting. In those moments I turn to prayer and I pray God's best intentions for the world, especially best intentions for those who have harmed me or people I love. I know that God's intentions are better than my own. And I pray for myself and for those who disagree with my vision of the world. I am always aware that my vision is partial: I only see what I have been taught to see, or what I have worked hard to see. Trusting God's vision through prayer reminds me about the abundance of God's love and grace.

Here is the good news: We have what it takes to continue to work processes of forgiveness through truth-telling, accountability, compassion, and prayer.