

Welcome

Hi everyone. My name is Tommy and I'm the Youth Pastor here at Catalyst. Welcome to worship - especially those of you who are guests with us. For the next hour we're here together, the only thing we ask of you as a guest is that you be open to hear from God. We believe God has gathered us all here, and if we're open, God will speak to us.

We're going to talk about forgiveness today. When I was younger I may have been a difficult student. One Spring day, when I was in fifth grade, I got ahold of some fireworks. I had bottle rockets, black cats, and wizzers. Wanting to serve my fellow students, I decided one day after school I would put on a firework show. So we used the alley, since it was protected by large pine trees, it obstructed any view of me and my accomplices. I had it all worked out, one friend was setting up the fireworks in the agreed upon order, while another was keeping lookout at the entrance, all the while, I was dancing through them madly setting off all the fireworks. I was like a kid in a candy store there was nothing but Joy all around me.

Then the moment we dreaded came, one of our teachers was headed our way. I immediately sprang into action setting a trap in the entrance. The trap was a brick of blackcats that could sometimes sound like gun fire. In hindsight this was not wise, kind, or very well thought out, but I was merely thinking of our escape and freedom from the tyranny of the school hierarchy. The second she stepped in the entrance I lit the blackcats and ran. I was able to make it to the end of the alley and watch as the teacher ran, slipped, skid her knees, and was otherwise terrified running at the school screaming. Of course I had a good laugh at the time, but in the weeks to come I felt so guilty, the teacher missed work, had skinned her knees running, and was rightfully terrified.

I was raised Catholic, so I did what good Catholics are taught when we sin: I went to Confession. I told the priest and he tried to teach me why this isn't good and why I should not have done it. So I took my assigned prayers and I moved on. I tried to at least, but the problem was this guilt was just weighing on me. I carried it with me like extra weight, nervous I would be caught, worrying about consequences that never came.

Something about the way I practiced Confession didn't work. Though I knew what I did was wrong, the priest didn't help me restore the broken relationship between me and that teacher. My actions had wronged *her*, and it wasn't enough just to say a prayer and say, "I'm sorry" to God. Because that social relationship remained broken, I remained trapped in guilt for weeks, for months.

Forgiveness is a difficult thing. Let's talk today about how we forgive, and how we help others forgive. And to talk about forgiveness, we have to talk about confession. Because forgiveness really begins with being honest with ourselves. Only when we're honest with God can we experience God's forgiveness, which will in turn help us to be conduits of forgiveness to others.

Too often we don't forgive, or we try to forget instead, or we try to forgive without facing our own need for forgiveness. We get it backwards. When it comes to forgiveness, everything begins with God's love for us. Let's begin this morning by celebrating that together.

Message

This summer, we're working through the Apostle's Creed, one of the oldest statements about what Christians believe. These beliefs are not gateways to belonging, but invitations to life. When we say, "I believe..." we are acting in faith, trusting the wisdom of the Church across the world and throughout time that has found these words to be the Way of God, the way to life.

We began by confessing God as our creator, insisting that our lives have meaning and purpose. Since then, we've been investigating belief in Jesus - everything from his identity as God to his incarnation to his second coming.

We're finishing the Creed with the statements that speak about God the Holy Spirit. We began by considering what it means to say that the Holy Spirit is God. Last week, we talked about what it means to say the Holy Spirit makes us the Church. Today, we explore the mission the Holy Spirit gives us: **I believe in the forgiveness of sins.**

[**Scripture Slide 1**] If you have your bible, bible app will you turn to Mathew 6:12-15? If you have one of the free bibles in the back it will be on page XXX. This is a piece of the Lord's Prayer, which is the model of prayer Jesus gave his followers when they asked him how to pray. Jesus specifically teaches us to pray for forgiveness. But his words are surprising because he links how God forgives us with how we forgive each other.

We are going to see how the church talks about forgiving each other. We are not talking about personal forgiveness, if you remember when Debbie talked about God forgiving our sin. So today we are going to look at how the Spirit enables the church to be a people of forgiveness, so that maybe we would begin taking horizontal forgiveness like our forgiveness of each other as seriously as we take vertical forgiveness, the way God forgives us. Let's read how Jesus teaches us to pray:

Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. -- Matthew 6:12-15

"Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We usually think of that little word "as" in terms of time. Forgive us at the same time we're forgiving other people. As though God's forgiveness and our forgiveness happen at the same time.

But the Greek word there means not ‘at the same time as’ but ‘in the same way as’. It’s about quality, not time. So Jesus is telling us that we should pray, “God, forgive my sin the same way I forgive the sins of other people.”

Stop for a moment: Are you a good forgiver? What would happen if you prayed this? What would it look like if God forgave you the same way you forgave other people?

For me this is scary. When Jesus tells me to pray like this, I realize that, personally, I have some work to do in the forgiveness of others category.

Take a deep breath. I don’t want us to miss what this is saying. It is clearly saying if you are not good at forgiveness is a legitimate problem, it is anti Christian and goes against the work Jesus did on the cross. Don’t skip this or tune it out, we can’t pretend this is not a problem we as the church need to address.

On the other side of this we should also clear up that if you are bad at forgiveness there is hope. Forgiveness, is like belief, belief in action moves us through to invite ourselves into a way of living and acting based on what we claim to believe. So if like me you’re feeling a little conviction right now, we have to ask ourselves: How do I get better at forgiveness?

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn or click over to Matthew 18. Again, in the free bibles, that’s on page XXX. God’s people were asking the same question in Jesus’s day we see this. The teachers of their day, the rabbis, taught you should forgive someone up to three times. No just once, not even twice. Three times! Let’s look at when Jesus is asked to weigh in on this very question:

Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

“But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

“But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

“His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

“When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and

said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” -- Matthew 18:21-35

Peter asks what we all want to ask, how many times do I need to forgive. And Peter goes way above and beyond the other rabbis’ advice - not three times but SEVEN!? I’m sure he was feeling very holy about himself.

But what he really wanted to know was, ‘When is it okay for me to not forgive?’ Is there a magic number to get to? Once I reach that number am I exempt from giving forgiveness?

Jesus’ response - 70X7 - was an obvious hyperbole. He meant that you can’t put a number on forgiveness. Why not? Because God doesn’t, and we’re God’s people. To illustrate his point, he tells a story of a man who was forgiven an impossible debt - hundreds of millions of dollars, then turns and immediately insists on being repaid a few thousand.

It’s not that the debt he was owed wasn’t real - who couldn’t use a few thousand extra dollars?! It was that, on the whole, he came out impossibly far ahead. A few thousand dollars compared to hundreds of million is literally fractions of a percent.

Jesus insists this is how we stand before God: forgiven an impossible debt we could never have repaid. Rather than casting us into eternal punishment, God declared us square. In light of that forgiveness, Jesus insists we can’t act toward our fellow humans with anything other than the same sort of outrageous generosity. We can forgive for the rest of our lives and never come close to forgiving as much as God.

So why don’t we forgive? Because sometimes not forgiving feels good, it feels safe. It is easier not to forgive, I can protect myself if I don’t forgive.

That’s not true. Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick.

Teresa and I just started letting Tayten, my 6 year old, start playing video games. It has been hard for us to unleash this for him, because he has trouble with boundaries. Like any six year old he is still learning that sometimes too much of one thing is not always good. We have set up time limits or we let the kids take turns with the tv so that we can teach them how to share. A few weeks ago we were shutting down his nintendo because it was his little sister turn to decide. Tayten tried very hard to convince her that she wanted to play nintendo, which she doesn’t know how to play, he even tried to bribe her with candy and a few things, but her mind was made up to watch a Disney movie. I don’t even remember what movie it was, but I remember Tayten’s reaction. Since she chose a movie Tayten immediately got upset. He was angry and he would not let it go, he was so mad and used up so much energy being upset he passed out on the couch. He wanted her to choose to play nintendo and he couldn’t forgive her for choosing to watch a movie. Instead he missed out on his chance when the movie was done.

He could have continued playing games, but he was so exhausted he was asleep and missed the opportunity.

This is what happens when we don't forgive, there is all this energy, time, and effort in not forgiving.

How do we get good at forgiving others? Jesus says it's by remembering how much God has forgiven us. By facing and acknowledging our own sins we are able to receive God's gift of forgiveness. This helps us be able to willingly forgive others. The practice of confessing our sins helps us be honest about how much God has forgiven us.

When I was going to Catholic school I didn't quite grasp this. It was like when my kids, Tayten and Aria, are fighting and I make them apologize to each other. As children they do not quite understand why they are apologizing, other than I made them do it. I treated confession like this as a duty because I was told to or to make myself feel better, but the practice of confession is meant to teach us to reflect on God's love. Confession leads us to empathy and grace.

We are adults now, we aren't kids. Our Church doesn't practice confession like the Catholic church. No one makes us shake hands, no one makes us say sorry, but don't we know better? We should be able to reflect on our own faults, weaknesses. We should be able to reflect on where we can do better and be better. We do that by remembering the forgiveness we have received.

This is one of the reasons we encourage Life Transformation Groups here at Catalyst. These are smaller groups than our C-Groups; usually no more than 3-4 persons. LTGs are a great space for confession. They allow us to help one another see God's grace, see God's love that transforms us and allows us to learn from one another while encouraging others to receive forgiveness as well as give forgiveness.

You need a safe person to confess to: someone who won't judge you or condemn you. Confession is about being honest with God, with yourself, with your brothers and sisters in the Church.

The Church is the people who insist on forgiving because God forgives us, and that's what it looks like to be God's image. We are a people who insist on forgiving because we insist on removing bitterness and creating more space for love, gentleness, kindness and growth.

We can choose to be a people of unforgiveness. We can choose to be like Tayten, harboring resentment, anger, and unforgiveness to the point where it just wears us out. We can be like I was when I was a child and confession did not fix my problem. I'd love to tell you that story had some sort of resolution, but it didn't. That broken relationship between me and my teacher was never repaired.

We can continue to remember those people that betrayed our trust or let us down. We can continue to be hurt and in pain and live in fear.

But when we live like that, we cut ourselves out of God's economy of forgiveness. We cut ourselves off from the life that is truly life.

Instead, we can insist on being a church that believes in the forgiveness of sin - not just our own sins, but the sins of others.

We can insist on pursuing forgiveness of those who wrong us. Not once. Not twice. Not three times. But as many times as it takes.

We can insist on saying, "I'm sorry" instead of holding a grudge. We can insist on going out of our way to restore a broken relationship. We can refuse to let bitterness take root in our spirits.

We can insist on confessing our sin to each other.

We can insist on being safe people for someone else to confess sin to: refuse gossip. Refuse to talk bad about people behind their backs. We can make it easy for people to confide in us.

If we can do these things, with God's help, then we can be a church that proudly announces to the world that we believe in the forgiveness of sin.

Creed + Communion

[Communion Slide] We begin our journey of forgiveness by approaching the Communion Table. This table invites us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. At this meal, he broke bread and gave it to us, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat it all." Later in the meal, he passed a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin."

We approach this table as sinners, honest about who we are before God. We find at this table impossible, infinite welcome and forgiveness. We find the grace we need to go back into the world as impossible forgivers.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion today. If you are willing to receive God's forgiveness and commit to forgiving others, then you're welcome to join us this morning.

Before we approach the table today, we're going to say the Creed together. The creed is a goal, not our starting point. These are things we want to believe, things that have proven true to Christians over thousands of years, and so we trust that enough to take it seriously and wrestle with it for ourselves. After we say the Creed, I'm going to pray for us. Then, as you're ready, you're welcome to come to Jesus' Table.

Please stand and say the Creed with me:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayer

God,

You created us for life. And even though we sinned, you forgave us by sending your Son, Jesus to become one of us, show us your way, and die for our sin. Such a gift is too great for us to imagine. So rather than try to think our way to forgiveness, we respond to your invitation and approach your table. We come as sinners and we receive wafers and juice. We pray they become a spiritual food that nourishes us. We pray your forgiveness overwhelms us such that we leave from here and go back into the world as people who forgive and forgive and forgive again - seventy times seven times.

We pray and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.