



September 13, 2026

"Forgiveness"

Pastor Liz Radtke

Prior to coming to Christ Lutheran, I worked on the synod staff, working on behalf of the Lutheran congregations in Virginia.

One of my main areas of ministry was conflict management and mediation.

When a congregation had a conflict that grew and was affecting the whole community of the congregation, I would come in and help however the context needed.

I would do everything from one-on-one mediation to conversations with the church council to whole congregation mediation.

And I would teach.

I would teach congregations how to walk through conflict in a healthy manner—how to even come out stronger on the other side.

And a lot of what I taught and what I used in these meetings and mediation comes from the things that we hear in today's readings.

Today's readings look at forgiveness.

But it isn't a simple forgiveness, a flippant forgiveness. But rather, as Reverend Rowen Robinson says in his devotions for *God's Work, Our Hands*:

This is a deep forgiveness.

That hard forgiveness, that costly forgiveness that, with time and effort, can lead towards reconciliation, towards rebuilding and restoring a fractured community.

This is a forgiveness that requires effort, that requires empathy, that requires humility, that requires persistence, that requires curiosity, and that requires work—hard work.

This kind of forgiveness does not erase or undermine our memories or what we experienced—the hurt that we felt or still feel. But it does allow us to learn to live with the memory, to relate to the memory in a different way so that we can be made whole, so that the community can be made whole.

In our first reading from Genesis, we see that the memory Joseph's brothers have of what they did to Joseph is weighing on them.

They remember selling Joseph into slavery. And even though this part of the story takes place many years after the family has been reunited, and they have been living together in Egypt, the brothers have experienced forgiveness. The family has seemed to be reconciled, even though all of that has happened. The brothers don't trust it.

Jacob, their father, had died, and the brothers are fearful that the only reason that there is harmony was because of Jacob.

They don't trust Joseph's forgiveness. Their guilt lingers; the memory lingers.

They thought that Joseph's forgiveness was flippant, that he didn't really truly forgive them—because could they have truly forgiven if the roles had been reversed?

And so they devise a plan to assure their safety. They evoke Jacob and say that it is his dying wish that Joseph continue to take care of his family.

And how does Joseph respond?

He sees through the words to what is at the heart of them. He sees the fear of his brothers, and he responds not by yelling at them, but rather by saying:

"Do not be afraid."

Joseph then goes on to reframe what has happened, to look at it through a different lens. He says, "Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

And then Joseph reassures his brothers that they and that all of their households will be protected and taken care of.

This kind of deep forgiveness isn't about forgetting.

It is about a choice that we make every day not to live in pain, in the trauma, in the hurt, but to free and restore ourselves in a new beginning.

And this isn't easy.

It is very easy to continue to live in the hurt, to live in the memory, to let it control you. It is easy to hate the other, or to forgive them on some level but not fully—like "I forgive you, but I'll never forget."

That isn't this deep kind of forgiveness.

This deep forgiveness frees you. Frees you from the memory, the hurt, the pain, from another controlling you. It frees you to be who God has named and claimed you to be.

Which takes us to our second lesson.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "We are the Lord's." He says this to a group of people who are living in tension. This new church, this new community is experiencing every day disagreements over food laws, over personal beliefs, over holy days. It has gotten so bad that they are creating camps: us versus them.

And communication has completely stopped.

They don't want to hear the other side because *those* people are wrong.

And these things that they're wrong about—they matter so much.

Paul is on the outside of all of this looking in, and so he can be a little bit more objective than those who have chosen a side and are defending it. And so Paul, from his objective outside perspective, tells them to stop despising each other, to stop judging each other.

Paul says embrace your differences. It is about unity, not uniformity. And that unity is in Christ—Christ who taught to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to care for the poor, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and to love your neighbors as yourself.

And the rest of it? These interpretations about what food laws are right, or what personal beliefs are right, what holy days are the right ones?

They don't matter.

This community is letting these things—these personal convictions, these personal interpretations—take the place of Christ, to the point that these interpretations inside have become their new little "g" gods.

This reading is about the practical steps of living in this deep forgiveness.

We aren't to judge one another over our personal beliefs or interpretations.

We are not called to force others to believe the way that we do.

Paul even says welcome those from the other side, but do not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

We are called to stay connected to one another even if we don't agree. We are called to embrace our differences. We are called to love one another despite what other little "g" gods someone else may have.

We must not let these little "g" differences take God's place, nor the place of the cloud of witnesses that we were baptized into.

As the body of Christ, we must learn how to navigate and uplift the complexities of being in community with each other, where we celebrate diversity and where our unity is not uniformity, but our unity is in Christ because we are the Lord's.

And yet, even when we do strive for embracing the complexities of people and perspectives, when we are living in our unity in Christ, we are still going to cause each other pain.

Which brings us to our gospel reading.

Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive those who sin against him as many as seven times, which is a holy number, a number of completeness. And hearing this, Jesus says something extreme and shocking. He says not seven times, but I tell you 77 times.

Jesus is saying that forgiveness is beyond a holy, whole number. It is infinite. There is no point at which you throw up your hands and say, "I've forgiven you enough; I'm done."

In the parable that follows, a servant is forgiven a substantial debt.

He is forgiven a debt that Jesus intentionally makes staggering—an unpayable sum of money. The easiest way to think of it is: one denarius is equivalent to one day of labor. So one talent is equal to 6,000 denarii, in other words, about 20 years of labor. So these 10,000 talents would be 60 million denarii, which is roughly 200,000 years of labor.

This servant, now having been forgiven this huge debt, refuses to forgive a small debt in return.

The servant has forgotten this incomprehensible love and mercy and kindness that he received. He lives in the freedom from this great gift, and instead of using that freedom to spread that love and mercy and kindness to others who need it, he takes this freedom and tries to corrupt it into power over others.

This is not of God.

When we forget the love that we have been given, the grace poured out for us, and the mercy offered when we least deserve it, we become not of God.

But when we remember what we have been given, when we remember how God has gifted us with grace and mercy, and—as our Psalm reminds us—God is full of compassion, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, then we can stop counting what others owe us and start caring for the other, and why they became indebted in the first place.

This is deep forgiveness.

And this deep forgiveness should not be seen as a private act.

Our readings tell us the opposite. In fact, this deep forgiveness is communal.

As we celebrate *God's Work, Our Hands* Sunday this year, working together on projects as a church and as a community, we must remember that when we stay connected and share in this deep forgiveness, it can transform our lives together.

When we are connected to one another, we see how deep forgiveness sustains a community amid differences, how a chosen family withstands challenges and comes out the other side united in service for others in the name of Christ.

Forgiveness is hard—especially this deep forgiveness that we've been talking about today.

But we don't do it alone.

We do it together.

So let us together experience God's abundance at this table.

And together, let us serve as we share that abundance with others.

Amen.