

**77 Times**

Psalm 103

Matthew 18: 21-25

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

*Psalm 103*

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.

*Matthew 18: 21-25*

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a

hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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Mary Luti, a retired seminary professor and pastor, is one of the many amazing writers for the Stillspeaking UCC Daily Devotional. She recently wrote a devotional that I would like to share with you this morning as we think about forgiveness—what it means to forgive, and what it means to be forgiven. Each week we offer a prayer of confession in our worship, a time we come before God and ourselves to acknowledge the ways we have fallen short of God's expectations of us, and we ask God's forgiveness and assurance. Every week we ask, we repent, and every week we are forgiven. There is a constant cycle. It is impossible to sit down on a Sunday morning and say, "Whew, I was perfect this week!" Yet, how often is it that we are not doing, thinking, or saying something that is straight out wrong to others, to creation, or to ourselves, but instead is more of a 'lesser of two evils,' a time or situation that requires something of us that is not truly what we would want to do, so we are less than our honest, genuine selves?

Perhaps you have been asked how long you worked on a project and you are not comfortable saying how long it took, so you give yourself credit for less time?

Perhaps you are not feeling well, or are struggling with a personal challenge, but when you are asked by someone with a serious illness how you are, you immediately respond with the fiblet that you are fine.

We are left feeling uncomfortable by our responses, but would feel even more uncomfortable, anxious, had we been wholly honest.

Mary's devotional looks at those frequent compromises we make to keep the peace, to maintain our privacy, or to make a choice that is better for someone other than ourselves. It is good news for us who demand the best in ourselves and others, yet must compromise more than we would like.

She begins with the story of Naaman.....

Naaman said, "When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may God pardon your servant." Elisha said to him, "Go in peace." - 2 Kings 5:18-19 (NRSV, adapted)

Naaman is a proud general with a skin condition doctors can't fix. A servant urges him to go to enemy Israel and consult the prophet Elisha. Naaman's offended. That backwater? But he goes. Elisha tells him to bathe in the Jordan. That trickle? He's offended again. But Naaman relents, bathes, and is cured. Humbled, he believes in the living God.

We usually stop reading here. But there's more.

Before departing, Naaman pulls Elisha aside. "I know God is God alone," he says. "But it's complicated. Back home, I have to accompany my king when he worships the old gods. And I have to bow down, too. Not good, I know, but maybe God would look the other way?"

You'd expect Elisha to angrily invoke the first commandment. But he doesn't. He pre-pardons Naaman's compromise. Even the God who commands "no other gods before me" is apparently not as touchy as we think about occasional lapses of integrity.

Human progress towards wholeness is a ragged affair: one step forward, two back. God accepts Naaman's stutter-steps. It's progress enough for now. God takes whatever God can get.

That's good news for us who demand moral purity and perfection in ourselves and others, yet always end up compromising. Life is indeed complicated. You might not dare ask God to pre-pardon your eventual lapses like Naaman did, but aren't you glad God would?

It's a relief when Elisha waves off Naaman's future failing. A relief, an antidote to perfectionism, a reproach to judgmentalism, a cause for praise.

Then Mary closes with this prayer:

Merciful God, we both know I'm going to compromise, so please pre-pardon me. Tell me that progress enough for now is good enough for you. Amen.

Compromise. Pre-pardon. It seems that much of what we confess each week could fall into that whole idea as we stutter step our way with occasional lapses of integrity towards progress as we confess to God who is gracious, slow to anger, compassionate, and steadfastly abounding in generous love, as we seek forgiveness from God who does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

This is good news reassurance for much of what we confess, what we acknowledge to God and to ourselves, but what about the bigger faults? What about the things we hold against *others* as unforgiveable, or hold against *ourselves* as unforgiveable?

Jesus taught that we are to forgive seventy seven times, so we need to begin with what forgiveness is, and what it is not so that may indeed forgive seventy seven times.

Let's start with what forgiveness *is not*. Forgiveness is *not* forgetting, condoning, a substitute for justice or sentimental excusing. It is not dismissing the hurt that was caused, it is not letting 'someone off the hook,' and pretending the offense never happened. It is not a denial of reality or offering a quick reconciliation. Often that is how forgiveness is understood so no wonder things can seem unforgiveable.

Forgiveness *is* both a voluntary and intentional *process* in which the person who was hurt experiences a change in their feelings and viewpoint so that emotions such as revenge and resentment can be overcome. Forgiveness is completed in the mind and the heart of the one who has chosen to forgive, to no longer bear the burden of pain, resentment and anger. We are not even obligated to tell the other person that we have forgiven them.

When Jesus taught us to forgive seventy seven times, he was actually speaking to our natural human impulses. Seeing how much daily inhumanity dominates the news, it can be hard to believe that people's nature, hard wired nature, is to be free to face our future, to be released from the past that cannot be changed, to want to follow the path of grace that heals us.

When we can forgive, we have given ourselves the permission for a better way to deal with the memory and the fact that we have been violated, wronged, hurt. When we forgive we stop making the pain last longer as we do something beneficial for ourselves rather than waste time and energy creating ways to get even. As author Lewis Smedes wrote, "A sip of sweet revenge, maybe, but with no lasting joy in it." Forgiveness allows us to reclaim the joy, the happiness, the safety, the security, the trust, that had been stolen from us.

Forgiveness heals us of both the initial pain of the offense, and the lingering resentment that gnaws away at us. Forgiveness lets us move ahead freed from bitterness. When we offer up

to God our prayers of confession, have you ever considered that God could feel better by forgiving God's beloved humanity rather than holding onto all the brokenness we collectively have wrought upon creation and one another? When we forgive, we are drawing on, and giving out, the energy and grace of the God in whose image we have been created.

True forgiveness of others, of our self, is not an easy journey. It is conscious and intentional as we willingly forfeit the right to hurt another who has hurt us and come to realize that forgiveness is a value that improves our lives. Forgiveness moves us away from being the victim with no control in the situation. When we can make this journey, a journey we can take with those who support us, and by relying on God's grace through prayer, we can allow ourselves to be free of the spiritual, emotional, and mental ropes that have bound us to the one who is to blame for our pain. We can draw on the mercy and grace of the One who forgives us, who abounds in steadfast love, the One who does not accuse nor keep anger forever. Even if we find ourselves unforgiveable, God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Forgiveness is mercy, love and grace shown to us, and is mercy, love and grace we offer to others, to our self. God forgives even the seemingly unforgiveable debt of ten thousand talents, *of six billion dollars*, and calls us to offer forgiveness to the one who has offended us with the debt of 100 denarii, the debt of \$49. Like any other parable, Jesus goes to extremes to make his point. We are forgiven the compromise sins, as well as the seemingly unforgiveable ones, and when a time comes for us to take a journey toward the forgiveness of others, we need to remember how often we are in need of forgiveness ourselves, of all that God has forgiven us, so that we too may offer forgiveness that touches the humanity of the one who offended us, and lifts the burden from us.

Let us close with this prayer:

Merciful God, we both know we're going to ask for forgiveness, as well as be called to offer forgiveness. As we take the stutter steps forward, as we ask for your help, as we move towards letting go of the burdens and offer release, tell us that our progress is good enough for you. Amen.