### Romans 14:1-12

 1Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. 2One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 4Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

 5One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. 8If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

 9For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. 10You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11It is written:   
   " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,   
   'every knee will bow before me;   
      every tongue will confess to God.' " 12So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

### Matthew 18:21-35

### 21Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

 22Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

 23"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents[was brought to him. 25Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

 26"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

 28"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

 29"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

 30"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

 32"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

 35"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

“Unforgiven”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

I had a student once who was a royal pain in the neck. Well, I’m sure I have had more than one student who was a pain in the neck, but this young man really got under my skin. Eventually he was kicked out, because it wasn’t only my classroom rules he wouldn’t . . . Or couldn’t follow. Man, I was angry with him—probably even irrationally so. I want to share how I felt when I read a disturbing notification several years later. My student had died of a brain tumor.

He probably wouldn’t have cared if I had found a way to forgive him, but I did. I never got around to it, and he left the school to my relief at the time. I still think about him, though, and it was probably fifteen years ago that he died. I had judged him, and I had really, really disliked him, and our relationship was never resolved, never reconciled.

For me, I find myself connecting to both Paul’s letter and to the Gospel lesson when I think about my student. An Australian pastor and theologian named Bill Loder writes the following: “The image of debt is helpful in considering the meaning of forgiveness. When someone is in our debt we have power over them. To forgive is to give up power. Forgiving is a form of giving. We no longer hold something back in our relationship with someone.” There had been a time when my student had confided in me; he had told me about some of the things that went on in his home that made it difficult for him to take seriously some adults’ suggestions for his own behavior. When I think of what Bill Loder suggests about what being indebted and what forgiving means to a relationship, I think it was I more than he that had some giving to do. I had grown absolutely certain that I was right and he wrong; that he had to give and I had to receive his apology. In doing so, though, I had cut off our opportunity for relationship just as certainly as he had.

An Ethics professor of mine from seminary, Valerie Dixon, writes an ongoing blog called JustPeaceTheory, where I found a lecture she had given while she was still at Andover Newton. I invite you to consider with me some of what she shares in this lecture titled, “Thoughts on Forgiveness.”

“After the cross, while we are cleansed through the blood (I say Love) of Christ forgiveness is still contingent. I John 1: 7 - 9 says: “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and God’s word is not in us.” Here forgiveness is contingent upon confession.”

I would add here that this passage is about *our* relationship with Jesus. The contingency of which she speaks is difficult because *we* are asked to confess our sins. We have fellowship with one another when we walk in the light of forgiveness, and we walk in the light of being forgiven by God and being heirs of God’s promises.

#### This is obviously hard for me, because I keep going back to the internet, to my old notes and to my books. Another site I recommend to you is The Forgiveness Project, a UK-based charitable organization which explores forgiveness, reconciliation and conflict resolution through real-life human experience. The Forgiveness Project tells stories of forgiveness and reconciliation through a powerful exhibit called "The F Word."

#### Christo Brand was one of the guards who kept Nelson Mandela in the many years he was imprisoned, and tells this story. “Mr. Mandela is the epitome of forgiveness, able to reach out to all people. While he was in prison, the man who was the architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, died. When Mandela was finally released, one of the first people he visited was Verwoerd’s widow, Betsie. She received him with open arms in their house in a white suburb.”

Denise Green’s son died at 18, and his organs were harvested without request or permission in the late 90s at the Alder Hey hospital in England. She shared the following: “There was a lot of anger among the Alder Hey families, because no one was prosecuted. Justice hadn’t been done, and people felt betrayed and let down. Forgiveness was a not a word I used at first, but hearing the bitterness and anger I knew I didn’t want to go down that road. So I prayed to be able to forgive.

In the end I came to forgive the surgeon who did the illegal stripping, and the hospital management. I chose forgiveness because I did not want to be destroyed by bitterness. What happened was out of my control, but how I respond is within my control. Subsequently, the medical profession haven’t shut me out. I can sit down and talk to pathologists because I’m not out to attack them. They realize I want to listen and learn. And they too have learnt from me.”

Marian Partington, whose sister was one of the many victims of the West couple in Britain, learned after twenty years what had transpired around her sister Lucy’s disappearance.

“I once met another mother whose daughter had been murdered. She gave me a phrase that I now have pinned to my door: “forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.” Gradually, I have grown to face, accept and integrate the unresolved pain of the past. I have imagined something of Rosemary West’s suffering, something of Lucy’s suffering. I do not wish Rosemary West more pain.”

We may well consider that the things we have to forgive, or the things we have to be forgiven in us are of far less consequence than these incidents. We may understand that our circumstances are even *more* difficult, because the person who has done the deed is unrepentant. Yet, if we are a people who are called to be in relationship with all God’s sons and daughters, including those we hurt or those who hurt us, the consequences of our dangling relationships may be more significant than we believe. Jesus tells a story that apparently is full of exaggeration. The amount owed to the king is beyond most of our reckoning. The comparative amount owed to his servant is relatively inconsequential in this regard, but the lesson learned is not. We are called to forgive debts, both monetary and relational. We are called to forgive repeatedly . . . to the nth degree . . . to infinity and back . . . as many times as we are hurt, harmed or betrayed. Then, and we are told *only then* does God forgive us. This is one of those uncomfortable passages in which we may be worried that simple belief in Jesus really isn’t enough. We want to know that our faith is enough—and it is. In our faithfulness in *God’s* faithfulness, we confess our sins. We give up our sense of personal power and we lay our debts and our sins at God’s feet, and we are redeemed. We don’t have to worry about being tortured for our weakness and our sin. We need only lay our own infirmity on Jesus and turn to the world anew. Then, in the joy that comes from giving over the burden of thinking we have control or any kind of real power over ourselves or others, we begin to mend the relationships that are entrusted to us. When we know that it is only through Jesus that our own debts are paid, we can begin to see that what is *owed* us is only our opportunity to love. In this opportunity for reconciling relationship, modeled by God in loving us so much that he would send Jesus, we know how we are to live, and we know our hope is eternal. Amen.