"The Freedom to Lament: The Courage to Forgive", A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, September 13, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God" So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Romans 14:11-12)

[21]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?" [22]Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matt 18:21-22)

Many Americans and, indeed, people around the world were riveted recently during the 30+ day trial of Lindsay Clancy, the woman charged with murdering her three small children in Duxbury, Massachusetts in January of 2023. She did not deny that she killed them. She attributed her actions to postpartum psychosis, which caused her to hear voices telling her to kill them. Her defense was that the medical profession had not taken her psychosis seriously enough and that she was not guilty by reason of insanity. Her ex-husband was very vocal about the fact that he had forgiven her. He said, "I wasn't married to a monster, I was married to someone who got sick." He professed his love for her and his forgiveness of her and his hope that she will someday find some peace. For many following the trial, his ability to forgive such a heinous act seemed incredible. Just last year, when Charlie Kirk was murdered, his wife declared her forgiveness of the shooter during Kirk's funeral, barely a week after the murder. Again, many Christian people reacted to that with astonishment, some expressing anger that she would forgive a murderer as if that were somehow letting him off the hook, or allowing him to escape accountability for the act. She was very clear that her Christian faith required her to forgive, and so, despite her pain and grief and righteous anger over the murder of her husband she forgave the shooter.

Jesus has something to say about forgiveness and it is probably one of the toughest lessons he leaves us with. On the cross he forgave those who were murdering him, and ever since we who are his disciples have been expected to do likewise when we are wronged. When Peter asks Jesus how many times members of the church must forgive each other, Jesus first gives the answer "seventy times seven" which is meant to suggest an infinite or boundless number. He then tells a parable about debt, which suggests that forgiveness and debt are somehow related to one another. And while the parable talks about forgiveness in a financial context, Jesus was using that financial example to drive home a lesson about emotional and spiritual and psychological forgiveness that is even more important. Forgiveness is one of those spiritual disciplines that is easier to think about intellectually than it is to actually live out in real life, or to grasp from the heart. For most of us, I wager, forgiving those who have wronged us is one of the hardest things we ever learn to do and unfortunately, some folks never do learn to do it and it can leave them emotionally burdened and bitter and unhappy for years.

There are challenges with requiring forgiveness, however, that all too often religious people gloss over. Marina Cantacuzino founded an organization known as The Forgiveness Project in 2004. Their website contains many profoundly moving stories of people who have

forgiven someone who has done grievous wrong to them – murder, physical abuse, sexual abuse and the like. The Forgiveness Project also runs a prison program in England and Wales called RESTORE, which is a restorative justice program that brings offenders and their victims together for conversation in the hope of finding healing and forgiveness. The stories of forgiveness in these very painful cases are a testament to the healing power of letting go, and of finding empathy sufficient to see the one who caused harm as a broken human being in need of compassion.

Ms. Cantacuzino is not glib about the practice of forgiveness and she cautions that there are some potentially harmful ways of approaching it. She notes that "forgiveness is more than acceptance or letting go. It has to include an element of compassion or empathy." (Christian Century, 3/29/2017) She also cautions that pushing someone to forgive too quickly or before they are ready can be harmful. She quotes Desmond Tutu who advises us to "either renew or release a relationship that is harming us. In other words, forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation." And former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams opined "I think the 20th century saw such a level of atrocity that it has focused our minds very, very hard on the dangers of forgiving too easily . . . because if forgiveness is easy, it is as if the suffering doesn't really matter." (CC, 3/29/2017)

In the wake of the 2015 shooting by Dylann Roof at Mother Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC much of the country was riveted by the statements of many of the survivors and relatives of the victims of their forgiveness of Dylann Roof for what he had done. Nadine Collier, the daughter of one of the victims made a public statement just three days after the tragedy, wherein she said "I forgive you," … "You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. … You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you." Nadine Collier talked about the effect her forgiveness of Dylann Roof had on her and on others who also practiced this Christian virtue: "Forgiveness is power," she said, "It means you can fight everything and anything head on."

But not everyone affected by that tragedy agreed. Wilhelmina Middleton, a cousin to one of the victims of the shooting wrote a searing essay five years after the murders on the topic of forgiveness:

> We can be committed to love and radical hospitality, to welcoming the stranger into our midst, to extending a seat to join us at the table—while also maintaining our right to be angry and to righteously resist the violence against our humanity. To insist on a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent, and it goes against the very nature of lament. As Christians we celebrate the donning of ashes and sackcloth as a priestly act of lamentation and mourning. Why deny families, in a watershed moment of grief, this right to lament?
> My family did not offer forgiveness in the courtroom. The words of a few became the headline for all, which became in turn a marketable narrative made for television and for profit, for pulpits and for politics, in order to ease the guilt of white supremacy and remove accountability. In the rush to force this false narrative, our society failed to truly engage dialogue on race, racism, and racialized violence that targets black and brown bodies. (Christian Century, 7/15/2020)

Two families affected by the same tragedy. Two very different approaches to the Christian virtue of forgiveness. And a reminder that forgiveness is not a magic pill that erases evil and terrible harm whether done by one person to another, or harm embedded in social and political systems. And Ms. Middleton's lament raises the question – how does forgiveness relate to justice? A brief perusal of the many stories on the Forgiveness Project website suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive. When people commit crimes against other people, they must be held accountable, and our justice system is the way we do that. But for those harmed, the legal remedies are often not sufficient to bring them the inner peace that they so desperately need. For many the emotional release of forgiving the other person, even if that person shows no remorse, is what ultimately heals and enables them to move on. When the wrongdoer does show remorse and interest in repairing the harm, reconciliation may be possible. But reconciliation is a different thing from forgiveness.

Paul reminds us not to pass judgment on our brothers and sisters. And Jesus commands us to forgive seventy times seven. At the end of the day, forgiveness is a Christian spiritual practice and a virtue that can take a lifetime to learn well. To be sure, when we are harmed, a period of grief and lament is absolutely appropriate and necessary. A quick perusal of the psalms illustrates how deeply embedded in our history is the process of lament and indeed, there is an entire book of the Old Testament that does exactly that – Lamentations. It is also clear, however, that God calls us beyond our lament and grief to a place of healing. Forgiveness is key to that healing. Some of those people whose stories are recorded on the Forgiveness project website have some wisdom for us:

- [F]orgiveness is first and foremost a way of seeing. It cannot change the facts about the world we live in but it can change the way we see those facts. (https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/dr-chuck-sandstrom/0
- Forgiveness is not about forgiving the act but forgiving the imperfections which are inherent in all of us.(https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/samantha-lawler/)
- In the end, forgiveness released me from the hate that was consuming me. (https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/sammy-rangel/)

At the heart of the gospel is God's stubborn insistence that we are more than the worst thing we have done and more than the deepest wound we have suffered. Forgiveness does not erase grief, nor does it excuse harm; it simply refuses to let violence, bitterness, or fear have the final word. As followers of Jesus, we practice forgiveness not because it is easy, but because it is the path by which God draws us back into life—slowly, honestly, sometimes painfully—until we can see one another again as human beings held in the arms of the same merciful God. May God grant us courage to lament fully, to seek justice faithfully, and to forgive as we are able, trusting that every small act of release opens us to the healing love that makes all things new. Amen.