

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
September 13, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION

You have heard it said that forgiveness is all about the past; I say to you forgiveness is not about the past.

Forgiveness is about the present and the future. We want to live our lives with God, not the person who hurt us in the past.

— Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, *Embracing Forgiveness: What It Is and What It Isn't*

***CALL TO WORSHIP**

Leader: 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:

People: **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.**

Leader: 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.

People: **The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Majestic God, who led our spiritual ancestors through the perils of their journey: Lead us through the threatening times in which we live. Save us from the floods of our own misplaced trust, even as you saved them from the waters of the sea, and the weapons of their pursuers. On this day, grant strength to those who are weak, and support for all who are stumbling. Let every tongue praise you as we remember – with joy – your marvelous deeds. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of gracious favor, who does not reward us according to our deserving, but, rather, with wonderful gifts of forgiveness and mercy: Give us a new heart through the reading – and hearing – of your Holy Word this day, that we might not grumble, but rejoice at the extravagance of your grace, to the end that our lives might become instruments of that grace for others; for the sake of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

FIRST READING:

Sirach 27:26-28:7

*This book is also known as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach.
The name -- "Ecclesiasticus" --*

*suggests its use as a "church book" in the early Christian community,
which accepted it as canon.*

Like the Book of Proverbs, it consists of a variety of wisdom sayings....

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever sets a snare will be caught in it.

If a person does evil, it will roll back upon him,
and he will not know where it came from.

Mockery and abuse issue from the proud,
but vengeance lies in wait for them like a lion.

Those who rejoice in the fall of the godly will be caught in a snare,
and pain will consume them before their death.

Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them.

The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance,
for he keeps a strict account of their sins.

Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.

Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord?

If someone has no mercy towards another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?

If a mere mortal harbours wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?

Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside;
remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.

Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor;
remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.

SECOND READING:

Matthew 18:21-35

This morning,

our Sermon Text from Matthew immediately follows last week's reading.

*That reading concluded with Jesus' promise to answer his followers' prayers,
and to be present whenever they gathered in his name.*

*Jesus also outlined the steps toward reconciliation --
with a church member who has sinned against us....*

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, the 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."

SERMON

"The Heart of Healing"

With a healthy dose of both candor – and humor,
Franklin B. Adams once said,
"To err is human; to forgive, infrequent."

And so it is that the *acclaimed author*,
and *retired pediatric surgeon* – **Dr. Bernie Siegel** –
has written extensively on a most interesting connection:

That is, the connection between a patient's attitude – and approach – to illness,
and the success of the healing process.

And – perhaps not surprisingly –
love – and forgiveness – are chief among his *"seven steps to healing."*

Dr. Siegel writes:

"Don't make physical change your sole goal.

"When someone comes to our groups –
saying, 'I've come to get over my sickness' –
I tell them that's the wrong reason.

"Come to obtain peace of mind, acceptance, and forgiveness.

"Learn to love.

"Learn about hope, love, acceptance, forgiveness, and peace of mind –
and the disease may go away in the process."

Dr. Siegel explains this to his patients:

"The only way you can live forever is to love somebody –
then, you really leave a gift behind.

"When you live that way –
as I have seen with people with physical illness –
you literally have a choice of when you die.

"You can say,
 'Thank you, I have loved as much as I possibly can,
 and I'm leaving at two o'clock today.'

"And you go.

"Then – maybe – you spend half an hour dying,
 and the rest of your life living.

[But] "When these things are not done,
 you spend a lot of your life dying,
 and only a little bit of time living."

Again, note the special emphasis
 that **Dr. Siegel** places on love, and forgiveness –
 ingredients that he believes are essential to the healing process.

But – nevertheless – we know – all-too-well –
 that one *of our greatest errors* as humans
 is how often we fail to *really* love;
 how infrequently we *really* forgive.

And so – as **Dr. Siegel** argues – how little we truly live.

As we are reminded – again, in this morning's **Gospel reading** –]
 forgiveness is *one of those nagging topics*
 that we encounter frequently in the **New Testament**.

And – *perhaps ironically* – this reading
 immediately follows **Jesus' promise** of a *blessed community*:

*"For where two or three are gathered in my name,
 I am there among them."*

In any event – immediately after this teaching – **Peter** comes to **Jesus** and says,

“Lord, if another member of the church –
someone who is part of that, most blessed gathering –
sins against me,
how often should I forgive?

“As many as *seven* times?”

And – **Jesus** says to him,

“*Not seven times,*

but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

(18:21-22)

Jesus’ answer means that –

when it comes to the matter of forgiveness –
no mathematics are involved.

That is to say, **Jesus** *sets no limits* on forgiveness.

Rather – he tells us – we must keep on forgiving, again, and again.

And – consequently –

there is no possibility of a **Christian** forgiving too often;
there is only the tragedy – of not forgiving often enough.

Jesus’ answer must have been as hard for **Peter** to take as it is for us.

Peter seems to want some *definitive boundaries* on forgiveness.

He wants to be able to *keep score*,

and – then – to *judge* where he is on the mercy scale.

And – with his *proposition of seven times* –

we might well suspect that **Peter** is feeling *quite magnanimous*:

Seven is – after all – a *nice, biblical number*.

It is greater than two,

and – forgiving seven times –

should rank **Peter** high on the righteousness scale.

Recall that common saying,
 *"Fool me once, shame on you.
 Fool me twice, shame on me!"*

But the fact is that – both in Peter's day, and in our own –
 we do *like to keep score*.

And, we don't just keep score in card games, or sports;
 we keep score in life.

That is, we never seem to outgrow our childish ways of judging –
 judging who got the bigger portion of dessert,
 or how many presents our siblings got at Christmas –
 compared with our gift count,
 or – even – trying to figure out which – among the kids –
 is grandma's favorite.

We may *change the categories* that we count, and measure.

But, *we still* count, *and* measure.

Now we look to "likes," "shares," and "followers."

And, we scrutinize our peers' posts – to see who among us –
 is aging well, doing well, and living well.

And – in so doing –
 we try to discern where we fall –
 on the spectrum of success, and well-being.

We can feel righteous – and right – in our political positions.

We can assure ourselves that –
 as is the case in **Lake Wobegon** –
 our children – and grandchildren – are all above average.

And, we can tally up the aggregate score of our worldly worth,
and – depending on the day –
judge that we are better off than some....
usually better than most....
and – at least – not like that other person....

And so it is that –
although we may intend to go along with **Jesus' teaching** –
we have *our subconscious ways* to try to get around it.

We may say to ourselves,
*"I'll forgive him for what he did to me –
because my religion says I have to –
but I'll never forget it."*

And – as a result – the resentment *keeps churning up* inside;
there *is no real* forgiveness.

So – if we *really want* to follow **Jesus** –
we *must* face the challenge, head on.

But, why this divinely-ordained difficulty?

Why has **God** made it –
so that our *human fulfillment* depends on the *quality of our mercy*?

Why has **God** decreed that our peace of mind – and soul –
indeed, our ultimate happiness –
depends upon our willingness to forgive,
and – even – to forgive our enemies?

Here, recall **Jesus' words** – earlier in **Matthew** –
during the "*Sermon on the Mount*":

(5:43-45)

*"You have heard that it was said:
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*

"But I say to you,

***Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;***

***for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."***

Who can give an answer to that?

*Who can claim to understand – fully – the awesome reality of **Divine Love**?*

*Only **God** – of course – for **God is Love**.*

(I John 4:7-8)

*In reality, our knowledge of **God** is but a mere, human, glimpse.*

*As **Paul** wrote to the **Corinthians**,*

(I Corinthians 13:12a)

"For now, we see in a mirror, dimly...."

*And – so – no one can fully understand the **Divine**,
the creative process of love, and mercy, and forgiveness.*

For that reason, it all comes down to a matter of trust.

***God** comes to us in person – in **Jesus of Nazareth** –
asking us to trust him.*

*And **Jesus** tells us that –*

*in order to grow into the beautiful, fulfilled persons we were created to be –
we must learn to forgive the brother or sister who has wronged us.*

And, we must do so unconditionally:

"not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

*Indeed – according to **Dr. Bernie Siegel** – we fail to do so *at our peril*:*

We are told that the writer – **H. G. Wells** –
came from *an unhappy home*.

His parents quarreled – constantly.

His mother had no regard – nor respect – for her husband;
she resented him deeply,
and shared her feelings with anyone who would listen.

After her death, **H. G. Wells** found his mother's diary.

And – in it – she had *kept a record* of every one of her husband's shortcomings.

What a sad state of affairs.

Certainly for **Mr. Wells**, but even more so for his wife:

She was a woman who was so embittered – so unhappy in her marriage –
that she *made it her life's work*
to record what she saw as *her husband's human failings*.

And, she did it in *excruciating detail*.

In retrospect, we cannot help but wonder –
given **Mrs. Wells'** sole focus on the negative,
and her gnawing resentments –
how heavy a burden that little journal must have become!

Friends, the *temptation to be score-keepers* in our relationships
will *always exist*.

We have the option to carry grudges, to harbor resentments,
and to tally them up –
in the hope that the day will come –
the day when we can “get even, and settle the score.”

And – sometimes –
we can't believe that it is possible –
even for our own "score" – to be forgiven....

The story is told of a man, who –
for many years –
had been living under a terrible burden of guilt.

He had done something reprehensible –
something which no one else knew about –
and he was convinced that he was beyond all hope of forgiveness.

Finally, he met a woman – who was something of a mystic.

She claimed to have visions –
visions in which **Christ** appeared –
and *spoke to her*.

And so – seeking to test her claim – the man said to her,
"You say that you are able to speak directly with Christ in your visions.

"I have a secret which no one else on earth knows.

"The next time you are in conversation with **Christ**,
please ask him what sin I committed years ago
that destroyed my peace of soul."

The mystic said that she would – gladly – ask **Christ** the question.

Several days later, the two met as agreed.

Immediately the man asked,
"Did you visit with **Christ** in a vision?"

"Yes."

"And did you ask him about that terrible sin – I committed years ago?"

"Yes."

"Tell me – quickly – what did **Christ** say?"

"He said, '*I don't remember.*'"

This *amazing reality* is expressed in an old gospel song – by **Helen Griggs**:

Gone, gone, gone, gone!
Yes, my sins are gone.
Now my soul is free
And in my heart's a song;
Buried in the deepest sea.
Yes, that's good enough for me;
I shall live eternally,
Praise God! My sins are gone!

The true beauty of this old song is that it cuts both ways:

Our souls are free – and our hearts are filled with song –
when we accept forgiveness from **God in Jesus Christ!**

And, that same freedom – and that same wonderful song –
are ours – also – when we are willing to forgive others!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

The reconciling act of God in Jesus Christ exposes the evil in us as sin in the sight of God. In sin, we claim mastery of our own lives, turn against God and others, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. We lose our humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation.

Through the ages, wise and virtuous persons have sought the highest good in devotion to freedom, justice, peace, truth, and beauty. Yet all human virtue, when seen in light of God's love in Jesus Christ, is found to be infected by self-interest and hostility. All persons, good and bad alike, are in the wrong before God and helpless without God's forgiveness. Thus all people fall under God's judgment, and no one is more subject to that judgment than the one who presumes to be guiltless before God or morally superior to others. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (*Unison*)

Loving God, receive our tithes and offerings to your glory and honor. May fruitful results occur through – and beyond – our sharing. Call us into the vineyard of meaningful labor and constructive leisure, that your Word – living through us – may call our neighbors to join us in joyous fellowship with you. May we help one another to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

In the midst of the most unjust offense ever committed –
his crucifixion – **Jesus** said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”

And – in comparison – the slights we may have endured amount to precious little.

In forgiving, may we follow the example of our Lord;
the very healing of our hearts depends on it!

Indeed, forgiveness *is* the very heart of healing....

Let us receive the Lord’s benediction....