



*Heaven's Gatekeeper*  
*Matthew 18:21-35*  
*Sunday, September 13th, 2020*  
*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*  
*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

Text: So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (v. 35)

I have a confession to make. I do not like this reading, or rather the last verse of today's reading. It makes God's forgiveness conditional. I do not like a "conditional god". Of course, Jesus essentially said the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount as well as when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. "Forgive us our debts" or "trespasses" "as we forgive our debtors" or "those who trespass against us." Does he mean that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our ability or willingness to forgive others? That's what Jesus said, and I don't like it. It has haunted me for years.

I have a story to tell you. I come from a family of grudge-keepers born of great insecurity. There is a reason for this insecurity; both of my parents experienced great poverty. My mother once told me about the time when she was 9 or 10 years old that a kindly doctor near the small town where she grew up allowed her to wash the office floor in order to earn money for her "school shoes" in the fall. And my father once reminisced, though that's not really a good word to use in this case, that there was a time or two scavenged blackberries to eat as his supper. Poverty has a way of making one insecure, as does other life uncertainties.

When I was a boy my father and one of his sisters had a falling out. Feelings were hurt and nursed. No one was totally right and no one was totally wrong. That is always the case. But for 15 or 20 years they did not speak to each other.

After I had been ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament for a few years and after leading a good number of Bible studies and study groups in reading C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, my dad and I got to talking. I remember the scene quite clearly. I don't know what led us into the conversation but at one point I said, "You know, Dad, forgiveness is so central to the teachings of Jesus that I have come to conclusion that whatever comes after this reality, if there are "pearly gates" then the gatekeeper will be

the person from whom we are most estranged from in this life. We'll have to greet them. God won't exclude us from heaven; we'll exclude ourselves. God won't condemn us to hell; we'll condemn ourselves because we refuse to forgive."

I don't know if that conversation had any bearing on what happened next, but shortly thereafter my father and aunt were reconciled. He and his siblings had several family gatherings, shared stories, and even laughed together.

I don't know if God's forgiveness is conditional or not. I hope that it is not. I hope that Love wins, as the apostle Paul wrote. After all, Love does not keep track of wrongs, he wrote. And it bears all things, hopes all things. And later he wrote that nothing can separate us from the love of God; not height nor depth nor principalities or life or death or anything else in all creation.

That being said, we still have Peter's question. "How often should I forgive?" Forgiveness is not optional for anyone who takes Jesus seriously. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend that something didn't happen because it did. Forgiveness doesn't mean that things can be as they were before, because they can't. But forgiveness means that we move on. It means that we let go of the past, and maybe more importantly, let the past let go of us. It means that we treat the other person with respect. It means that we do not wish them ill.

And we do this not because it is good for us, though it is. Nor because it is good for the other person. It means that we do it for God, for the glory of God. Amen.