

Forgiveness

A Lenten Series for Renewal and Contemplative Action

St. David's Episcopal Church
2020

Prepared by
Rev. Dr. Stefanie Taylor
Dr. Arthur Taylor





Opening Prayer

A note about Self-Care



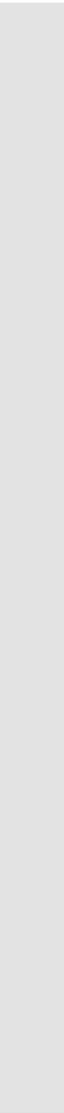
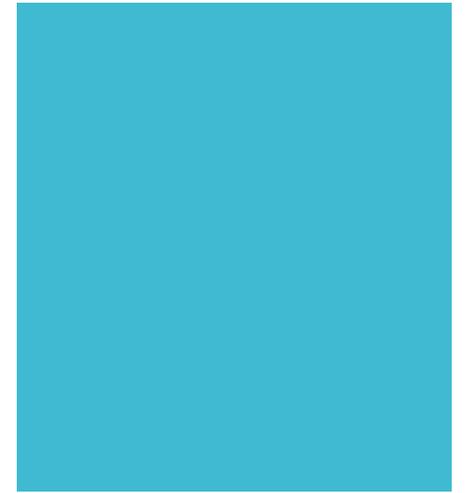
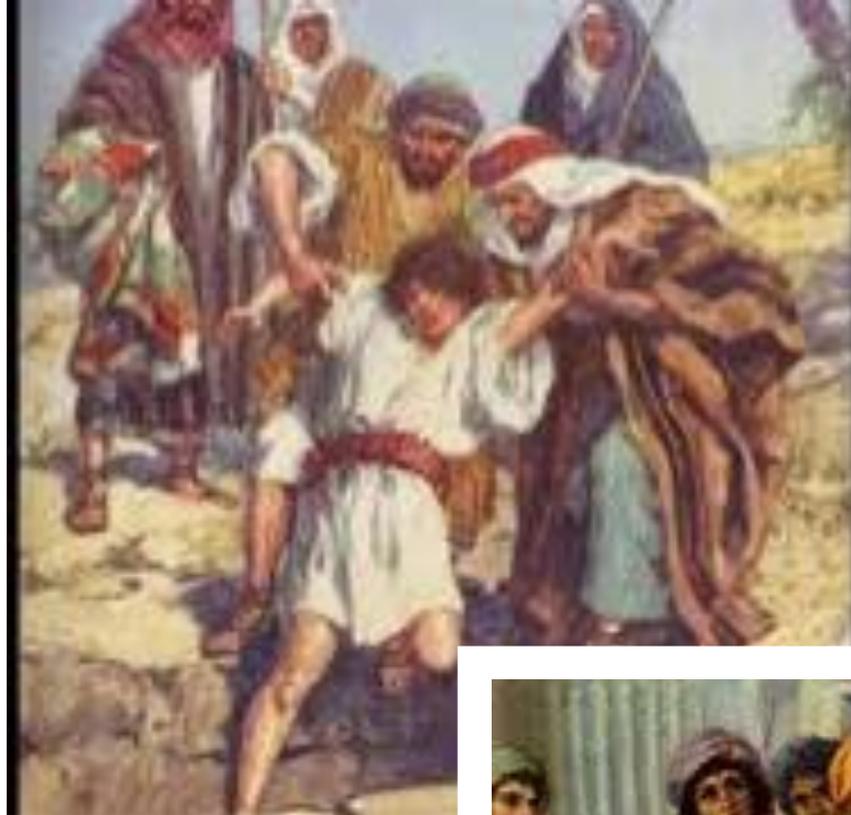
- We are passionate about the work of forgiveness, and believe strongly that when we forgive we harness what is best in us and what is best *for* us.
- But, sometimes this work can get hard. When that happens, working toward forgiveness becomes the work of caring for ourselves, so that we can keep going.
- Because this series is not therapy, please think about what other resources you might need to feel safe but also confident that you can learn and grow in this work.
- A list of professional supports can be provided to anyone upon request.

Session one: purpose and scope

- Connect with the Joseph story and its implications for your Lenten journey
- Recognize the biological and psychological reasons we struggle to be forgiving
- Learn and practice the conditions in which we become once again free to forgive
- Use daily meditations and other methods to deepen your forgiveness journey during Lent



Joseph's Story



Why aren't we all better forgivers?



- When someone harms us, our physiology actually motivates us in the **opposite direction** of forgiveness:
- **Emotions become heightened** and awareness narrows
- Our behavior becomes more **rigid and habitual**
- We think more **negatively and egocentrically**
- Essentially, human beings have evolved so that **it is not hard to not forgive.**
- So learning to forgive always starts with *unlearning* how we have withheld forgiveness, or **unforgiveness**

The Biology of Unforgiveness



- Our response to being wronged or injured is immediate, instinctive, and designed to preserve us in the absence of connection and comfort:

- **We fight**
- **We flight**
- **We freeze**

- Our bodies are flooded with adrenaline, overpowering the body's rest and digest systems, increases breathing and blood flow

- If our bodies don't solve the problem, our brain floods with pain-numbing endorphins that "freeze" our attention, numbing us from the threat

- These processes do not have a natural endpoint as in other animals, but can be perpetuated for days, even decades, and become stronger and more habitual as we experience similar events

HOPE

A powerful tool for
changing...everything

- **Hope** is the inner resource that begins to make room for something beyond unforgiveness
- Hope is **seeing in the dark**—a conviction that something more is meant for us in spite of our blinding suffering, fear, or righteous anger
- Hoping to be free of unforgiveness awakens our **inner witnessing self**



"First, we'll try a placebo."

Taking the first
step:
Uncovering

- **The first step in the forgiveness journey is consciously choosing not to continue walking a path of avoidance, resentment, revenge, shame, or anger.**
- This only becomes possible once we have worked on two things:
 1. Disrupting and disentangling from the physiological and psychological responses of unforgiveness
 2. Making the effort to become hopeful that we do not have to live in the grip of how we have been hurt

Deep Breathing

Using focused meditation is the most effective method to disrupt the unforgiveness cycle

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD_71eoxPFM

- *Why is meditation the treatment of choice in 2020?*
- Clinical Research has demonstrated that meditation is the most reliable way to **reverse the biological damage of trauma**
- Meditation not only reduces negative cycles of thinking and feeling—it **strengthens almost all our most valuable, life-giving functions**
- Meditation as a practice has been shown to **prevent physical illness and slow or remedy pre-existing illnesses** such as autoimmune diseases and conditions stemming from high blood pressure
- It increases our ability to live moment to moment, or mindfulness, **reducing our vulnerability to depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other mental illnesses**

Taking the next
step:

Deciding to forgive

- As we readjust our perspectives and come to appreciate the futility and even self-harm of unforgiving, a choice opens up: forgive the person who harmed you.
- The next step is **cultivating a desire** for what forgiving the person will bring to your experience
- This **does not replace the negative feelings or pain** that resulted from the wrongdoing—we may continue to struggle with unforgiveness even as we commit ourselves to a different course
- It requires us to **approach our pain** without our psychological defense mechanisms, and **acknowledge our own shortcomings** that prevented us from letting go sooner, more easily, or more fully

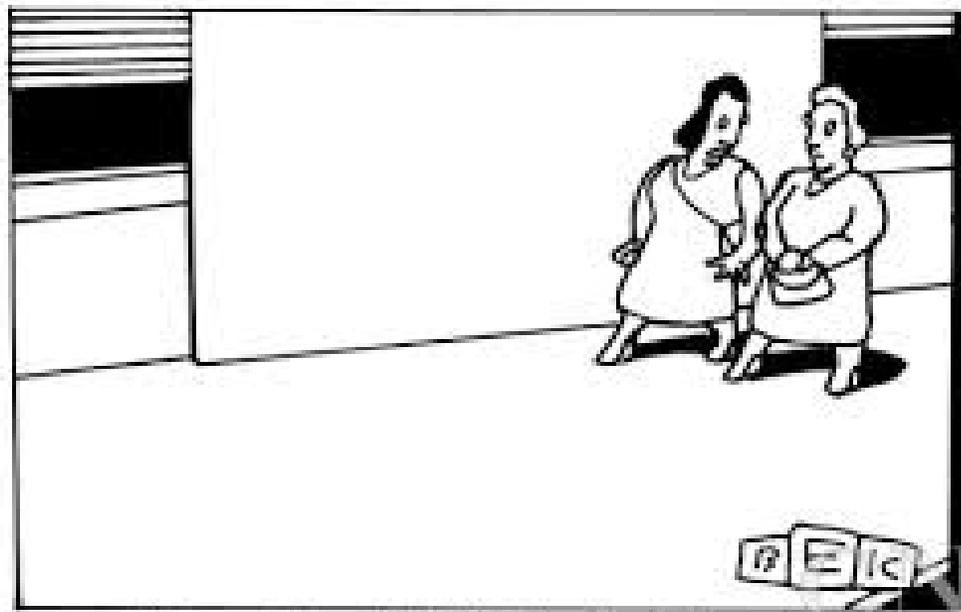
Welcoming Prayer

A meditation practice for opening, accepting, and committing to a larger set of possibilities

- Welcoming prayer is a method of **consenting to God's presence** and action in our physical and emotional reactions to events and situations in daily life. The purpose is to deepen our relationship with God through consenting in the ordinary activities of our day.
- As practiced by Father **Thomas Keating**:
 - Welcome, welcome, welcome.
I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing.
I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.
I let go of my desire for power and control.
I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure.
I let go of my desire for survival and security.
I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.
I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within. Amen.

Stepping into a
common space:

Developing Compassion for the offender



"I've never forgiven him for that thing I made up in my head."

- As long as we continue to distinguish our rights and needs from the person who wronged us, we cannot really forgive
- In forgiving, we are seeking to understand the other person in a way that promotes compassion, empathy, and even gratitude that your life has not led you to make the same decision he or she has made.
- Taking this step may require us to interact with the other person in a different way, to listen, and to modify our preconceptions about why this person did what he or she did.
- It encourages us to step away from binary thinking of right/wrong, good/bad, me/you.

Forgiveness Meditation

This guided meditation comes from the work of Dr. James Gordon, and can be found in its fullest version in his book, *The Transformation*.

- *A few suggestions to help you with this practice:*
- Find a comfortable sitting position that you can hold without effort for a few minutes; feet resting on the floor, hands resting in your lap
- Close your eyes as you listen to the guidance; If at any point you feel agitated, open your eyes for a moment. If that does not help, try a few rounds of deep breathing.
- If after meditating you feel unsettled, feel free to stand up, move around, or get something to drink or eat. Some people even find it helpful to dance, shake, stretch, or jog in place to release the physical sensations that can occur during this type of work.

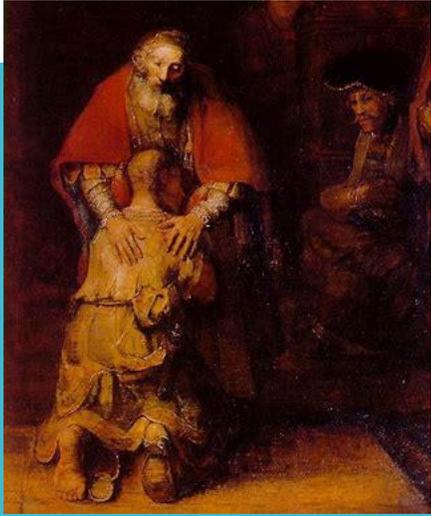
The (sort of) final
step:

Allowing Ourselves to Deepen

- **Forgiving quite often has some “side effects” as we move further into the process**
- The reasons we initially seek forgiveness—to feel less pain and misery, or to feel less antipathy toward the offender—often give way to other parts of ourselves that come alive in our efforts to be more compassionate, mindful, and non-defensive
- As we continue to nurture ourselves in this way, forgiveness becomes a way of fulfilling what we might think of as our **true selves**
- In spiritual terms, Forgiveness is ultimately a **vocation**, something we undertake because we discern that doing so enables us to be who we always have been but had not yet come to live as.

Returning
to Joseph:
The
spiritual
edge of
life's
suffering





Resources for a Lenten forgiveness journey

- As we prepare this Lenten season to witness the resurrection of Christ, consider Forgiveness as **making peace with no.**
- Forgiveness is a practice of **embodying our own good news**, that nothing in our lives is outside of God's love.
- **Everything you need is already contained in God's love.** The spiritual journey is to claim that larger reality, and enact it.
- We invite you to use the meditation practices today throughout this week and the rest of Lent. Consider setting time aside each day to pray or meditate on one of the forgiveness practices provided in your handout, from the Stanford psychologist Fred Luskin.