

## IT'S TIME TO FORGIVE

Week #3 of a 6-Week Series, "It's Time"

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**Rev. Richard Maraj:** So have you ever been hurt or mistreated by someone, and you held a grudge towards them for awhile? Anybody? Okay; only three people; that's fantastic! *[Congregation laughs]* How many people would agree that forgiving others is hard, but forgiving yourself is even harder? Anybody agree with that? And how many people – even though you know that forgiveness is important; even though you know it is good and it is healthy – still have someone in your life you refuse to forgive, and have said, "I will never forgive that person." Anybody have any ...? Okay; two people. We couldn't even ... *[Laughs with congregation]* Better!

You know, forgiveness is not our favorite subject. It's not our favorite subject in life; it's not even our favorite subject in church. Because forgiveness is hard! Forgiveness is not something we want to do, because it stretches us beyond our current capacity for love and forgiveness. For kindness and understanding. It stretches us beyond our boundaries and ideas about fairness and justice when people do something to us, or say something that isn't kind. And our thought could be something like, "I'm not forgiving that person and just letting them off the hook for what they did."

Forgiveness is the most difficult spiritual practice. And it is also one of the most important life skills. Because we cannot go through this life without some hurt and disappointment and frustration and pain. We don't go through this life without conflict and disagreement. As long as there are people, there will be a need for forgiveness.

I think forgiveness is so fundamental and important for a peaceful and happy life: they should be teaching it in high school. It should be a Life 101 class, and forgiveness should be! Because it is an absolutely vital and necessary life skill. You know, forgiveness is the ability and the practice of processing, healing and releasing the hurt and pain of the past so we can move forward in a healthy way.

You know, in a survey 62% of adult Americans said that they need more forgiveness in their personal life. And I would say it's probably more like 99%! *[Congregation laughs]* But I'm impressed that 62% actually acknowledged it! Because forgiveness is not easy. And it is absolutely vital.

So we're in the third week – Week #3 of our six-week series called, "It's Time." Because the truth is: We all procrastinate in areas of our lives of doing things that are important, particularly when they are challenging and difficult. This series is about addressing the areas in our life that shape and that affect the quality of our lives ... and doing it now, because it's time.

Week #1 was "It's Time to Wake Up." Last week it was "Time to Be Honest." And today it's "Time to Forgive."

You know, we need forgiveness in our lives because we tend to hold grudges, and we tend to hold on to resentments and pain of the past. The question is: Why do we have resentments and grudges?

And the first is because we hold expectations of how people should behave ... and when they don't, we get frustrated and disappointed. We almost set ourselves up for frustration and pain by holding these expectations. And when they're not met, we have a reaction.

The second thing is that we have this tendency to hold on. Sometimes we think holding on is always a good thing. And we end up holding on to things that aren't always good for us. Holding on to anger or shame. And sometimes we even hold on to unhealthy relationships. We hold to things.

Another one is that we like to blame others. We don't want to accept responsibility, so holding on to grudges is a convenient way of not accepting personal responsibility. It's really a mindset of being a victim, you know, when we hold on to grudges and resentments.

Another one is that we don't realize the impact that holding on to grudges and pain and bitterness and blame has on us. I read an article this week, and it was called, "Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It." That forgiveness has an impact on us physically, with our blood pressure, stress, our heart, cholesterol ... all kinds of ... But it also stresses on us and weighs us down mentally with anxiety and depression and frustration. It blocks our peace and happiness. And it actually reduces our ability to enjoy the life we have and the life that we want.

And the final one is that we don't know how to process our emotional stuff. So sometimes we would rather hold on and live in the pain, rather than doing the inner, difficult work and the work of forgiveness.

One of the things that we all realize is that life is about choices. Our lives are the sum of all the choices that we've made. And when someone says or does something that hurts us, or we feel betrayed or angry, we can choose to hold on to the pain. We can choose to hold on to the past. Or we can choose to forgive. We can choose to heal. We can choose to learn. We can choose peace. We can choose freedom.

It's time to forgive! And it's time to choose forgiveness. So this morning we're going to look at the four choices we need to make for forgiveness.

**The first one is to CHOOSE SPIRITUAL MASTERY.** How many people would like to have a more evolved spiritual awareness and a deeper spiritual connection? I think every one of us wants that. Our soul is yearning to know the fullness of its divine self. And whether you call it enlightenment, or spiritual awakening, or knowing our oneness with God, or our divine potential, or fulfilling God's will for us, every one of us has a deep yearning for a deeper spiritual connection. To develop spiritual mastery. To have a level of awareness and practice, and living from that spiritual place.

Emmet Fox talks about forgiveness and its relationship to spiritual mastery when he said, "*If we cannot forgive, we cannot make any real spiritual progress.*" This mindset of choosing spiritual mastery is a higher level of consciousness and awareness that knows that our evolution and our enfoldment and development comes from experiencing and moving through everything in our lives. And a part of spiritual mastery ... forgiveness plays an important role in our spiritual growth and evolution.

Jesus said that forgiveness is not just a practice; it is actually a spiritual law. And here are the places he expresses this law. In Luke he said, "*Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*" In Matthew 6 he said, "*If you forgive others' trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your heavenly Father will not forgive your trespasses.*" In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught, "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

And my favorite was a four-year-old boy's misquote of the Lord's Prayer: "*Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.*" [Congregation laughs]

And even the little boy's version all point to the fact that forgiveness is a spiritual law. That it is a Law of Cause and Effect. It is the Law of Attraction. That when we harbor feelings of bitterness, hatred and anger and condemnation that we are actually attracting more of the consequences of those types of thoughts and energies. When we hold on to these painful, toxic emotions, that we actually are creating more pain, and taking us further away from the very good things and happiness that we want.

Emmet Fox is right: That we cannot make spiritual progress or feel a deeper spiritual connection unless we forgive.

So I want you to think of someone in your life that you might need to forgive. And are you willing to go to a place where you realize that that is the part of your spiritual growth, your spiritual path, and your path to spiritual mastery. I mean, are you willing to choose spiritual mastery through forgiveness? And

to go deeper and have a look to answer the questions: Who do I need to forgive? What feelings am I still harboring and holding on to? And where in my life do I need to forgive myself? And for what do I need to forgive myself?

And this mindset of choosing spiritual mastery is to welcome and embrace and move through the areas where we need to forgive. You know, that's a bold choice: to choose spiritual mastery in the face of not being treated well. It's a bold and powerful mindset to be able to see life as an opportunity – and everything in it – for spiritual mastery.

**The second choice of forgiveness is to CHOOSE FREEDOM.** You know, to me, forgiveness is a choice of freedom. It is to free ourselves from being stuck in the past. It's to free ourselves from holding on to the pain. It's to free ourselves from resenting or reliving the past over and over again.

Remember in the Book of Genesis with Lot and his wife as they were leaving Sodom and Gomorrah? They were given clear instructions: Do not look back, or you will be turned into a pillar of salt. And so what did they do? Looked back! She looked back and she turned into a pillar of salt. Very powerful symbolism there. Salt is a preservative; it preserves us in that mindset of looking back. And what looks back? Bitterness looks back. Unforgiveness, resentment looks back.

And the other thing: She turned into a pillar. Now, most pillars that I know don't move fast! *[Congregation laughs]* They don't move at all! So not only preserving the pain, but not allowing us to move forward. It's a powerful teaching and a powerful lesson. It's about choosing freedom. Letting go of the past is about making a choice for freedom. Because otherwise, we imprison ourselves in the past. And we're the only ones with the key to actually release ourselves. To choose freedom is to choose to let go. It's to choose to move forward.

You know, we think the idea – I mentioned earlier – we're "letting them off the hook" if we forgive. And the only person we let off the hook is ourselves! Because we're the ones whose hearts and minds are filled with anger or regret or upset or pain. And so it actually lets us off the hook! Because when we're filled with that pain, our hearts can't feel peace or joy or love or laughter. And so we're the ones who let ourselves off the hook.

In the Book of Matthew, Chapter 18, Peter says to Jesus, "*Jesus, Lord; how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*" And Jesus says, "*No, no; as many as 70 times seven!*" So he blows it out of the water. And it's not about numbers. Jesus isn't saying, "*Hey; forgive 490 times, and 491 you let it rip! You let them have it!*" *[Congregation laughs]* It sounds like a nice thing, but it's not what he's saying!

And, in fact, it really isn't about numbers. No; it's about symbolism. The number seven in the Bible represents completion. So for him to say, not seven, but 70 times seven is talking about a perpetual consciousness – a complete consciousness – that is always letting go. Always releasing the past. And what he's saying is that forgiving means to keep choosing freedom. Keep choosing peace. Keep choosing release. Keep choosing happiness over and over and over again.

The freedom of forgiveness is about letting go. And you know what the key to letting go is? Is trust. Are you willing to trust that God loves you enough that you could let go of this pain, and let go of the past, and knowing that God has something better? That God has something more beautiful? More peaceful and more positive for you in your life?

You know, sometimes we're afraid to let go. And the same way we hold on, sometimes we're afraid to let go. We think things are going to fall apart. But the truth is: Letting go is about opening up channels for God's peace and love to come forth.

So the second choice is to choose freedom.

**The third one is to CHOOSE HEALING.** How many people here have someone in your life who really knows how to press your buttons? Anybody have anybody? I mean, somebody who knows exactly what

to say or do just to trigger you. To get you angry or tick you off. To get into your head and just throw your whole balance off for the entire day.

So we often think that the problem is these people. The problem is what they say. And the problem is what they do. That they're the reason for our unhappiness. But the truth is: Whatever they say or do are just triggers for us to look a little deeper at what wounds are really there. It is about the person, but it's also not about the person. It's about us.

I saw a quote once that I love, and it said, *"There are people in our lives who press our buttons, but they aren't the ones who installed them."* [Laughs with congregation]

You know, we all come into this life with gifts to share, with a difference to make, with things to learn, things to discover, things to awaken to, and also things to heal. There is not any one of us who doesn't have something to heal. There isn't any one of us that has some area where we feel wounded; where it's tender. Where it's something that needs the comfort and the nurturing and the healing for it to expand.

You know that any time anybody triggers something, it's not just about the trigger. It's an invitation and a sign for us to go a little deeper and see what it's really about. Is it about abandonment? Is it about shame or unworthiness or regret? I don't know what it is, but there's something there, whether we're aware of it or not. And that, every time we get triggered by somebody – get our button pressed – it's an invitation and a sign pointing us to go a little deeper to see what that thing is that needs to be healed.

And so we need to pay attention to the triggers! And see: What are the emotions and the pains that really come up when someone at work – or someone in our lives or family – says these things? To open a path for us to choose healing.

And we can do a simple prayer of: *"God, I am willing to heal. I am willing to learn. I am willing to let go. Heal me. Teach me. And help me to let go."* Even a simple prayer. Because you know what the most important thing is? Is healing. The most important thing with forgiveness is: Are you willing? Are you willing to let go? Are you willing to be healed? Are you willing to learn and discover whatever it is that needs to be transformed in us?

**And the final choice is to CHOOSE COMPASSION.** When someone does something that's not nice to us, the last thing we do is have compassion for them. And think about their feelings. Our usual response as human beings is to shut down: to close off our hearts and put up a wall to protect ourselves. And the fact is: Compassion is vital. Because compassion is about opening our hearts. And compassion is necessary for facilitating forgiveness.

You know in the Scripture where it says, *"No greater love than this, than a man who would lay down his life for a friend"*? We always think that's about, you know, laying down your life and taking a bullet or dying. But it's really – the message behind it really is – is that we would set aside our own needs to think about what someone else is going through. Of what they're struggling with. Of what their needs are. And especially when they don't always express themselves in a healthy way. What's really going on behind them? And it's that willingness to open our hearts – our willingness to feel or see what's going on with them – that is really the beginning of opening ourselves to forgiveness. Opening ourselves to a greater level of understanding and care and love.

You've heard me share this story if you have taken my prosperity class. But about 10 years ago I was attending the Buddhist temple on Townley, and they were doing a series of compassion meditations. And the person that popped up in my head was my grandfather, who died when I was three years old. And he was living with us and our family at the time. And my grandfather was really not the nicest guy in the world. He didn't treat my father very well.

And when my dad was 11, his mom died. And, you know, my grandfather kind of shamed my dad, took a lot of things out on him. And he was really not the nicest guy in the world. In our culture, the parents

live with you until they die, so he came and lived with us. And he didn't treat my mom that well, either. And so he was kind of not the sweetest guy.

So in my head and mind, I shut him down. I cut him off. He was not a part of my life. He was not a part of my family. And I resented the guy; I mean, I was three years old, so I didn't know the guy. Because I was just upset at how mean he was about my dad.

So in these meditations, he popped up! And, you know, the funny thing is that I started thinking, "*I wonder what was going on with him.*" I only ever thought of it: My dad's mom died when he was 11. I never thought: My grandfather's wife died. I never thought what it must have been like to raise an only child by himself. I never thought of what might have happened in his life, where he didn't get treated well. And something in my heart started opening. This man that I virtually didn't know – but I blocked him out of my heart. And I began to realize: He's a part of me. And my heart began to open with understanding. Not excusing anything he may have done, but at least understanding.

And I'll tell you: Forty years after the fact that he died, he pops up in my head, and my heart opens. I had a healing. I was changed and transformed. I was more open and understanding.

And currently I have a member of my family who hurt another member of my family, and I'm feeling a little bit of resentment and upset. And I haven't been able to, but only like this week has my heart opened up to be a little more compassionate about what he's going through in my family.

In the Scripture it says, "*Be kind, compassionate and forgiving.*" And I really believe that compassion facilitates kindness. That compassion facilitates forgiveness. And compassion – according to the Dalai Lama – facilitates happiness. He says having compassion – caring for the welfare of other people and what's going on with them and a desire to alleviate their suffering – is one of the deepest levels of soul happiness and fulfillment. Because it brings us – not just to open our hearts – but to care about others. And that's why we are here!

They have done studies that show the pleasant centers in the brain that get triggered when we have dessert or sex or money – I can't believe money has a trigger point in the brain! But it's when you help someone, and think highly of someone, and want to support someone, it triggers in the brain. There is a soul-level of joy and happiness and fulfillment that can only happen through compassion: caring for others.

So my question is: Who in your life is calling out to you? For you to express a greater level of compassion and open your heart? And it's not about having lunch. It's not about any of those things. It's about opening your heart. It's not about being best friends. Even if you never see them ... like I did with my grandfather. It's a change will happen in us. In our kindness and our levels of understanding.

Compassion towards others is important. What's even more important is compassion for ourselves. Most of us don't have a tremendous amount of compassion for ourselves. I don't know about you, but I always like to say that we berate ourselves, we beat ourselves up. I always say that I went to the "Beat Yourself Up School of Self-Improvement." Anybody attend that place? [*Congregation laughs*] It's like quite a popular school.

But sometimes we're harsh on ourselves! We measure against some unrealistic standards and beat ourselves up for not being as perfect as we think we should be. You know, when we try to do that to make ourselves better – push, push, push and criticize – we live from a place of fear and anxiety and "I'm not enough." And that, even when we succeed, we can't enjoy it as fully. We don't as peaceful and joyful about it. Sometimes we feel more relief for success than we do joy.

You know, self-compassion sounds soft, but it's actually very powerful and transformational. Self-compassion is just about being kinder, being more supportive and gentle and positive and understanding with ourselves.

Now, if a teen-age child came home, and had a really rough day, and wasn't doing good in math, and a parent said something like this – *"You are so stupid and lame. You are a loser. You're hopeless and you'll never amount to anything!"* – we'd think, *"Oh, my God; that is horrible!"* We wouldn't even think of doing that! Yet we say things even worse to ourselves than that!

And think of the difference of the parent saying something like, *"You know, I know you're disappointed how things are going in math. And I know it's important that you do well. But what we're going to do is: We're going to create a plan together. I'll help out as much as I can; we'll spend a little more time with the math. Maybe we'll get even a tutor. But just know that I love you, I believe in you, and this thing's going to work out."*

See the difference? And the fact is: We can do that to ourselves. We could be a berating friend to us, or we can be a loving and supportive friend. The interesting thing is: Most of us think, *"If I have self-compassion, then I'll get lazy and self-indulgent. I won't be as driven and succeed if I'm not."* And, you know, studies the exact opposite. That the more we express self-compassion, the better we handle failure; the better we set new goals; the better we bounce back; the more likely we are to forgive; the more likely we are to be happy when we actually succeed and be happy along the way.

So the head of the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research – that is quite the title! – says this: That in those moments when you fail and you have a difficult time, choose to be compassionate and be a friend to yourself by just saying something as simple as, *"In this moment I'm hurting and struggling right now, and may I be kind to myself in this moment? And give myself the compassion I need?"* And then say, *"Next time I'll do better!"*

You know, say to yourself, *"I'm learning. And mistakes are just part of the journey, part of the process. Don't worry; things are going to improve! You've got a good attitude, good energy and good effort. Things will get better. Just remember I love you and believe in you."* Could you imagine if we did that to ourselves on the days that we have a hard time? That we struggle? I think it would be absolutely transformational.

How many people have seen the movie, *The Princess Bride*? And everybody knows Inigo Montoya? You remember the man that was trying to avenge his father's murder by the six-fingered man? And he trained to be a master swordsman so that one day he would get the six-fingered man and kill him. His whole life he's training for this and, by the end of the movie, after 20 years, he finally finds the six-fingered man. They're having a sword fight, and his famous line is – you know, even when the guy stabbed him he said – *"My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father; prepare to die."* And they're fighting and fighting. He stabs him again; he says, *"My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father; prepare to die."* And he kept saying this, driving the man crazy. And finally he ends up killing him.

And the point is, at the end, when he and Wesley – the lead character – get together, he said, *"Hey; so now that you killed the six-fingered man, what are you going to do?"* And Inigo had to pause for a long time. He said, *"You know, I've been in the revenge business so long, I don't know what to do with the rest of my life."*

And it sounds silly, but the truth is: When we hold on to bitterness and blame and resentment, just like that, we waste years of our lives. We waste so much: not just moments, but years. We distract ourselves and we rob ourselves of the joy and the love and the fulfillment that we are all looking for in our lives.

Life is about our choices, and particularly the choices we make when we're hurt. When we are mistreated. And the four choices to make are: choose spiritual mastery. Welcome whatever, particularly when you've been hurt, as an opportunity to develop spiritual mastery through forgiveness. Choose freedom. Choose to let go of the past and not be stuck in the pain. Choose healing: to be willing to heal, willing to learn, and willing to let go. And, finally, choose compassion. Open your heart to others and just try to understand. You don't have to be best friends. And also be a compassionate and kind and supportive friend to yourself.

Life is about choices. And if you choose to have a better life, it's time. It's time to forgive.

God bless you all!

*[Congregation applauds]*

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