

St John the Baptist, Beeston

Sunday 13th September 2026

Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

I've always been quite a fan of Charlie Brown, and the Peanuts Cartoons. And one of things I really appreciate about them is the way they very realistically portray the ambiguities and tensions that exist in human relationships.

There's one occasion when Lucy decides that she needs to have a straight talk with Snoopy. So she marches up to him and announces, 'You know there are times, Snoopy, when you really annoy me.' Snoopy drops his head and looks rather sad, so Lucy quickly adds, 'OK so I admit it, there are also times when I feel like giving you a hug.'

She drops down onto her knees and gives him a big hug. The final caption has a content – almost smug, looking Snoopy with a think bubble which reads, 'That's the way I am...annoyable but hugable.'

Annoyable and hugable seems to sum up well the ambiguities in most normal human relationships.

It resonates for most of us with our own experience of living in the real world.

If a relationship is going to flourish, if it's going to grow, then it's because we've identified those things that endear us to one another and draw us together. But at the same time, it's also because we've learned to overcome and even to transform those things that would ultimately pull us apart.

And that's true about every human relationship we experience – in marriages, between parents and children, with siblings, in our relationships with others at work, and of course, in our relationships in the church.

And you don't need to be a sociologist to know that the things that tend to pull us apart can seem to have a power all of their very own. Relationships are fairly fickle things. Which is why the most powerful three words anyone can ever express is simply this: *I forgive you*. Those words can set us free and they can set another person free, and no matter how vulnerable they make us feel they draw us more closely to the heart of God than anything else.

So when Peter comes to Jesus in Matthew 18 and enquires: '*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?*'

He is asking a question that is fundamental to human flourishing in relationships. The issue is how to deal with a personal grievance and what limits there may be in extending forgiveness.

Peter already suggests what to him and others would have sounded like the outer limits of generosity. *‘Should I forgive someone up to seven times?’*

Jesus’ response is striking because he tells Peter and the other disciples they are to learn to forgive without any limits. And he then illustrates his point very powerfully in a parable which compares God’s forgiveness with ours, teaching his disciples that there’s no limit to God’s generosity in forgiving us, and we should therefore seek to forgive others.

So do we find it so hard to forgive, even as followers of Jesus Christ?

Three reasons:

First, we don’t always appreciate the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation and trust.

Forgiveness has to do with the past. Forgiveness is not holding on to something someone has done against you. It is letting it go. It only takes one person to offer forgiveness.

Reconciliation has to do with the present. It occurs when the other person expresses regret, acknowledges the harm they have done and receives forgiveness. It takes two people to reconcile.

Trust has to do with the future. We are not required to trust someone simply because we may reach a point where we’re able to forgive them. A person must show through their actions they are trustworthy so that over time the relationship may be restored.

This is very important to understand in the realm of safeguarding, where otherwise urging ‘forgiveness’ on someone can become a means of coercion and further abuse, when there need to be clear boundaries in place to avoid further harm being done. It is also not for us to tell someone they must forgive, it is for them to choose to do when, and if, they are ready.

Second, we don’t find it easy to forgive, because we are often battling with our sense of self-importance or worth. When someone hurts us in some way we nearly always feel diminished and our fragile sense of self-worth takes a huge hit. Feeling belittled can create powerful emotions that’re difficult to control.

I don’t want to over-read the parable, but it does seem strange that the servant who has been forgiven such an enormous debt should come straight out and immediately pursue without any mercy a much smaller debtor. But I wonder if he felt so small in the eyes of those around him that he couldn’t stop himself reasserting his sense of self-importance, showing he still had power when he had been made to feel pathetically weak and foolish.

To give and receive forgiveness is to make ourselves vulnerable and then live with the realities of our weakness rather than hiding behind a distorted image of our strength.

The **Third** and most significant reason we don't find it easy to forgive – and this is the main point of the parable – is **we don't properly comprehend how much we've been forgiven by our heavenly Father.**

The author P.T. Forsyth pointed out that we must first know the 'despair of guilt' before we can appreciate 'the breathless wonder of forgiveness'. Which takes us back to the cross – it's why the Eucharist is the most profound expression of our worship and thanksgiving.

This is where we learn that we can be completely known and yet dearly loved. When we get this, it's truly life-changing!

So who do you need to forgive in your life at the moment?

If you've struggled with this then it will not suddenly become easier as a result of one sermon. The writer Philip Yancy has written a lot on this subject. He said, *"Forgiveness is no sweet idea to be dispersed in the world like air-freshner sprayed from a can. Forgiveness is achingly difficult, and long after you've forgiven, the wound lives on in the memory."*

For behind every forgiveness lies a wound of betrayal, and the pain of betrayal does not easily fade away."

When we forgive another person, we are not pretending they didn't hurt us, even deeply, and what they did doesn't matter. And we can't expect not to carry some of the pain into the future, whether or not that relationship can be partially or fully restored.

As a result, forgiveness isn't just a once for all moment, it becomes a daily attitude we chose to embrace. So that when the wound re-opens we're ready for it, and once again we give and receive the forgiveness that by God's grace can in time bring healing to that wound.

All the while, we're able to live in the freedom of God's inexhaustible love for us and his forgiveness without limits, in a world where hearts remain fragile and trust is easily broken: between people, in families, across the church and between nations. Through the cross of Christ, we have the gift of God's forgiveness, that continually flows to us from his heart and can cascade from us into our needy world.