

## **“Absurdly Abundant Absolution”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
September 17, 2023 - Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 19

[Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35](#)

The Israelites were in a tight spot. At least they must have felt so, being flanked by a wall of water to their left and another wall of water to their right, with Pharaoh’s army behind them, seeking to either capture them or slaughter them there on the miraculously dry path through the Red Sea. Even though their God, clothed in a fiery pillar of cloud, was separating them from their pursuers, they must have felt terrified, aware that the chariots at their heels could overtake them at any time. And to add to their fear, they were not being led by a mighty warrior or an army of any size, but were being guided just by a staff-wielding shepherd, though one who had a striking resemblance to Charlton Heston (or so we imagine).

Yes, they were in a tight spot, with the waves beside them and their enemies behind them; however, they were surrounded not only by dangerous, deadly forces, but by the protection and provision of God. Surely they were afraid, but even then, they could move forward toward freedom, trusting in God and God’s prophet Moses, who had thus far faithfully led them away from the land of Egypt, where they had suffered in bondage for generations.

God, who had split the sea for the Israelites and who kept them safely out of reach of their wrath-filled pursuers, kept them on a dry path as they journeyed through the sea. God then closed up the path behind them, saving them in their distress by vanquishing, at last, all of Pharaoh’s power over them.

“Free at last / free at last / thank God almighty / we are free at last!” they must have sung, or something like that anyway, in celebration of their salvation. And with thanksgiving, they responded to God’s gift of salvation by honoring and trusting in God.

We’ve all been through trying times in our lives, and perhaps you’ve been through moments where you felt that you were, like the Israelites as they traveled through the Red Sea, surrounded by great danger. I hope that you’ve

experienced in those difficult or dangerous times that God was present with you as you journeyed, providing for you and protecting you on the way. If you're living in such a moment now, I hope that you can sense God being loving present with you on your journey. For God is present with us, just as God was present with the Israelites as they fled from Egypt, and God still works to lead us to salvation.

We read about one of the many ways that God is doing saving work in our lives in our lesson from the gospel of Matthew. We heard in the lesson that Jesus' disciple Peter came to him and asked how many times he must forgive someone who had done him wrong. Peter, being generous, offered the number seven, thinking surely, that amount, a number as complete and whole as the number of days in God's week of creation, is more than enough. But Jesus replied that it was not just seven times that we are to forgive someone, but seventy-seven times, or the original text could also mean seventy times seven. In either case the point is that we are to forgive without limit. We are to do so because this is how God deals with each of us, forgiving us all without limit.

God's limitless forgiveness, this absurdly abundant absolution, cannot be earned and is not gained by any amount of saintly deeds or perfectly performed religious rituals. It is a gift, unwarranted and unearned -- grace freely given to each of us to provide for us. We are given this gift, like all that God graciously provides, not so that we can selfishly hoard it, but so that, with thanksgiving, we can be moved to selflessly share it with others, just as God lovingly offers it to us -- freely, without limits and without strings attached.

This calling we share, to be forgiven forgivers, is itself a gift. For it is in forgiving others that we can find a pathway out of the dark and dangerous place of being full of angry wrath at those who have somehow sinned against us. Forgiving others empowers us to not just be powerless victims, but to be active participants in the casting away our own shackles of bitterness, and this leads us to experience more of God's life dwelling within us.

Now forgiving another does not mean you to foolishly keep yourself in a situation where you are being abused or harmed, nor does being a forgiving person mean that you give an offender a lifetime pass to keep on offending you or that you should act as though wrongs done to you were never committed. Being forgiving

people does mean, however, that we always have God's grace in mind and that we always graciously deal with others, firmly if needed, to promote their well-being rather than seeking them harm out of spite or to exact what we think is some due punishment.

Likewise, as a church, being a community of forgiven and forgiving people does not mean we tolerate or enable people causing harm to others, or that we do not seek justice for the offended, or that we are OK with people taking advantage of each other's extension of grace. But it does mean that we try to develop a culture of caring, that we practice mercy, that we humbly seek the forgiveness of those we've harmed, and that together we compassionately seek to lift up the harmed in our midst in and in the world.

Friends, God forgives and seeks to set people free. Let us recognize God's forgiveness and all of God's freeing grace in our own lives, let us embrace these gifts, and let us respond with thanksgiving by mercifully and graciously working to free others. Amen.