

HEART OF THE MATTER (Inspired by the Don Henley Song)

Week #3 of a 5-Week "Songs of Life" Series

Rev. Richard Maraj

Sunday, Oct. 26, 2025

LYRICS TO 'HEART OF THE MATTER':

I got the call today, I didn't wanna hear
But I knew that it would come
An old true friend of ours was talkin' on the phone
She said you found someone
And I thought of all the bad luck,
And the struggles we went through
And how I lost me and you lost you
What are these voices outside love's open door
Make us throw off our contentment
And beg for something more?

I'm learning to live without you now
But I miss you sometimes
The more I know, the less I understand
All the things I thought I knew, I'm learning again

I've been trying to get down to the Heart of the Matter
But my will gets weak
And my thoughts seem to scatter
But I think it's about forgiveness
Forgiveness
Even if, even if you don't love me anymore

These times are so uncertain
There's a yearning undefined
And people filled with rage
We all need a little tenderness
How can love survive in such a graceless age
The trust and self-assurance that lead to happiness
They're the very things we kill, I guess
Pride and competition cannot fill these empty arms
And the work I put between us,
You know it doesn't keep me warm

I'm learning to live without you now
But I miss you, baby
The more I know, the less I understand
All the things I thought I figured out, I have to learn again

I've been trying to get down to the Heart of the Matter
But everything changes
And my friends seem to scatter
But I think it's about forgiveness
Forgiveness

Even if, even if you don't love me anymore

There are people in your life who've come and gone
They let you down, you know they hurt your pride
You better put it all behind you, baby, 'cause life goes on
You keep carrying that anger, it'll eat you up inside, baby

I've been trying to get down to the Heart of the Matter
But my will gets weak
And my thoughts seem to scatter
But I think it's about forgiveness
Forgiveness
Even if, even if you don't love me

I've been trying to get down to the Heart of the Matter
Because the flesh will get weak
And the ashes will scatter
So I'm thinking about forgiveness
Forgiveness
Even if, even if you don't love me

Forgiveness (x6)
Even if you don't love me anymore
Forgiveness (x4)

MESSAGE:

So how many people have ever had someone say something or do something to you that was unkind, hurtful and even hateful, and you had a really hard time getting over it and letting it go? How many people have ever known that forgiveness is the right and best thing, but you dislike the other person so much you refused to forgive them? Anybody have that one? And how many people have ever had a more difficult time forgiving yourself than forgiving others? Anybody have that experience?

Forgiveness! Forgiveness: it is a hard and tough thing. I saw a "Hägar the Horrible" comic strip, and Hägar's servant is talking to Hagar and says, *"This is the season we're supposed to forgive our enemies. Have you forgiven your enemies yet?"*

And Hägar says, *"Are you kidding? I haven't even forgiven my friends yet."* [Congregants laugh]

Forgiveness. Whether it is friends or enemies, family or strangers, neighbors or ourselves, we all need forgiveness. As long as there are people, there will be conflicts; there will be disagreements; there will be resentments and grudges held; blame pointed. Inevitably, every one of us will say something that will hurt someone; that will disappoint them, let them down; that will trigger levels of anger. And so, we need forgiveness in our relationships, in our families, in our workplace, in our country, in our world.

Forgiveness, I believe, is a vital, essential life skill and spiritual practice. And forgiveness is a practice that involves processing and healing and releasing the hurt feelings we can hold on to -- towards ourselves and others -- so we could move forward in a healthy way. And forgiveness is about choosing to release the energies and the emotions that prevent us from getting stuck in the pain and stuck in the past to keep the flow of peace and love and happiness moving.

I read an article entitled, "Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It." And there are all kinds of things I can tell you about holding on the resentment, and the damage it has, but what caught my eye was a survey

in which 62% of American adults say they need more forgiveness in their lives. Sixty-two percent! I think it should be 100 percent ... but I was impressed: 62% of the people admitted they need more of the practice of forgiveness in their lives.

How many would say that you need more of the practice of forgiveness in your lives? About 62%!
[Congregants laugh]

Forgiveness: it is some powerful stuff; it's some beneficial stuff. Because forgiveness frees, it heals, and improves our lives; improves our relationships. In terms of finding or reconnecting with our peace and happiness, forgiveness truly is the heart of the matter.

So we're in Week #3 of our five-week fall version of our "Songs of Life" series, where I take a famous hit song and extract from it an inspiring spiritual message to help us live fuller; to help us live more lovingly and more abundantly.

Week #1, we did "We Pray" by Coldplay. Last week we did "Could You Be Loved" by Bob Marley. Today, we're looking at the 1989 hit, "Heart of the Matter," by Don Henley.

And this song talks about forgiveness in the context of the break-up of a relationship. And in it, there's a break-up and he's just struggling with his feelings, his hurt, his thoughts. And then the song begins when he finds out that his ex is seeing someone else, and it brings up all his stuff again. And there's a line he's got in here:

All the things I thought I learned, I'm learning again

Anybody ever thought you were over something? Thought you dealt with it? Then like a year or two later, you get triggered and realize you've got to learn and heal it again, everybody? I think we all have had that experience.

And in his process, he begins to realize that his hurt and pain is not about her, but it's about him carrying the anger with him; that that's what's eating him up inside. And he realizes that he absolutely needs the self-liberating, self-healing power of forgiveness.

Now, Don Henley wrote this song with Mike Campbell -- who he wrote the "Boys of Summer" with, who was the guitar player for Fleetwood Mac -- and also with J.D. Souther, who did some Eagles hits. I think "New Kid in Town," "Heartache Tonight."

And so, the way it went was: Campbell gave the music to Don Henley. And then Henley called Souther to come up with lyrics. And at first they weren't quite sure what to do. But they coincidentally were both in love and engaged at the same time. And coincidentally, they both broke up and ended their relationship at the same time. And then they found other exes were seeing other people about the same time. And so, J.D. Souther said it was not an easy time. However, the hurt provided good source material to write this song.

Now, Henley's contribution that he is most proud of is the chorus. But he said he really struggled coming up with the chorus to try and figure out what was going on with his own struggle; with his own pain and hurt that he was going through. And then he came up with these words:

**I've been trying to get down to the Heart of the Matter
But my will gets weak
And my thoughts seem to scatter
But I think it's about forgiveness ...
Even if, even if you don't love me anymore**

In an interview, he said, *"It took me 40 years to write it and four minutes to sing it."* Because he said it took him a while to figure out the value and the power and the importance of forgiveness in his life.

And you know, the word "forgiveness" in Jesus' language -- which is Aramaic -- means to loosen; to untie. It connotes this idea to free ourselves from the anger thoughts, from the toxic feelings, from the negative emotions that we hold on towards ourselves and others. By not forgiving, we give our power away. But when we forgive, it helps us reclaim our power. It helps us reclaim our own inner peace.

You know, forgiveness is more than just a liberating activity. It is more than just a wise practice. It's a spiritual law. Jesus references it many times in the Bible. In Luke 6:37, It says, *"Forgive, and you will be forgiven."* And it is saying: when you send out energy -- the freeing, healing, loving energy of forgiveness -- you will receive the freeing, healing, loving energy of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is about clearing and keeping the flow of divine abundance moving in our lives. Because nothing stops inner peace like holding on to resentment; pointing fingers in blame; living in bitterness and regret. And nothing frees us and liberates us like forgiveness.

As powerful and as amazing as forgiveness is, I think many people are not quite sure about how to start and where to begin the process of forgiving. How many people have ever thought you're not quite sure how to forgive? Sixty-two percent ... No, I'm just kidding. [Laughs]

In a word, I would say that the starting place -- and you've probably heard me say it many times, because it's always the truth and always will be the truth. And that one word of the place to begin forgiveness is with willingness. Are you willing to forgive? Are you willing to no longer hold on to that pain and be living in the past?

You know, willingness does not sound very powerful and impressive to transform our lives, but it absolutely will. In the Bible, there's several references to saying how important it is to be willing. That willingness makes a huge difference. In the Book of Isaiah, it says, *"You must be willing and obedient. Those who are shall eat of the good of the land."*

If there is, first, a willing mind, it will be accepted according to what one has and what one has not. And to illustrate it how powerful the practice of being willing and the mindset of willingness is, let me ask you a question. How many people have ever been unwilling, stubborn, rigid or inflexible? Anybody?

Okay, let me ask it in a better way. How many people know someone else who was unwilling or reluctant or stubborn? [Congregants laugh] Oh, there we go! That's more than 62%!

In AA's "Big Book," it says willingness is a fundamental, indispensable quality for recovery in the commitment to do whatever it takes to get sober. Be willing! It opens us. It opens our hearts. It opens our minds. It opens the door to possibilities. You know, willingness is a life-changing awareness, expanding, consciousness-raising mindset that we can all have: to be willing.

In the song, it is wonderful to see the progress of the singer going from being stuck -- going from struggling -- to being willing to see it differently. Willing to learn; willing to change; willing to accept responsibility. And willing to learn how to move beyond this to something greater and better.

Let me ask you a question: On a scale of 1 to 10, how willing of a person are you generally? And where in your life could you benefit from being a little more willing? Are you willing to do what it takes to make your life happier and your relationships better? Are you willing to do the work that is the heart of the matter? Are you willing to forgive?

So, this morning, we're going to look at three areas of willingness that are needed to help us practice forgiveness.

And so the first one is you've got to be **WILLING TO LET GO.** Willing to let go.

A six-year-old boy asks his grandma, "How old are you?" And she replies, "I'm 39 and holding." The little boy thinks for a few seconds and then he says, "So, how old would you be if you let go?" [Congregants laugh]

We all, as human beings, have this tendency to hold on. And we have this tendency to associate holding on with being better and safe. "Hold on!" You know: "Just hang in." "Hold on. Hold on!" "Hold tough." We have all these things where we associate ... We do a lot of holding on that isn't good.

We hold on to all kinds of things in our lives. Anybody have a closet or a garage with clothes or all sorts of equipment -- gym equipment you haven't used? And like stuff you haven't used in a long time? Anybody hold on to stuff like that? Something that doesn't even fit you, and you think, "Well, one day maybe it will. I better hold on to it!" You know, we've got all kinds of things like books and magazines; stuff that we hold on to. Magazines and Tupperware. I've got a drawer full of pens; half of them don't work. I don't know why I'm holding on to it!

We hold on to emotional baggage, like grievances and grudges. We hold on to relationships that no longer are serving us -- are not even healthy -- but we still are holding on to them. We're holding on to activities and bad habits. You know, we keep holding on to things that are not for our highest good.

I always say that, if you're feeling stuck and life isn't going well, one of the number one things to ask yourself is: What am I holding on to that I need to let go? What are the things in my life that it is time for me to release?

So, my question for all of us is: What are you holding on to that is not for your highest good right now? What are you holding onto that's literally weighing you down? And stopping you and preventing you from feeling peace and moving forward with your life?

But the bigger question is: Are you willing to let it go? Are you willing to let go of the pain of the past? Are you willing to let go of the blame and the resentment? Are you willing to let go of the story? You know that "Somebody Done Me Wrong" song that we sometimes like to sing? "You know what they did? You know what they said?" And we keep repeating it. And we keep reliving and re-infusing ourselves with that hurt over and over again.

Are you willing to let go? Are you willing to release these things?

You know, the whole idea about letting go ... One of the key things and important things is about: Are you willing to give it to God? Are you willing to turn it over to your Higher Power? It's a powerful line: "Let go and let God." Release it. Liberate yourself. Lighten your load and turn it over to the higher intelligence of Spirit to heal it; to transform it.

And I think the whole idea about willingness to let go ... Letting go is an act of faith. Letting go is an act of trust; of knowing that there's a Presence, a Power and a Source that loves you and supports you and believes in you, and that has more in store available to every one of us if we just let go. If we just literally let go! Because letting go opens ourselves by

As I let go, I open myself to the divine flow. As I let go, I open myself to the divine flow.

Let's say that, half-voice, together: [with congregation:] "As I let go, I open myself to the divine flow."

Take a deep breath. And on the exhale, really let go.

Again, half voice: [with congregants] "As I let go, I open myself to the divine flow."

Take a deep breath. On the exhale, really relax and let go.

And one more time: [with congregation] *“As I let go, I open myself to the divine flow.”*

Deep breath. And really let go and relax as you exhale.

I think one of the most important spiritual practices is doing practices of surrender: meditations of letting go and releasing. You don't even need to ask for anything. Just the act of releasing and letting go literally begins to open and reconnect us to the truth and the goodness and the wisdom that is already within us.

The willingness to forgive starts with the willingness to just let go.

The second thing about forgiveness is about the **WILLINGNESS TO OPEN YOUR HEART.** You know, when we get hurt, again, an interesting reaction to human beings is that we shut our hearts off. We close off. We think closing off our heart is going to protect us is going to keep us safe.

And there are all kinds of ways that we engage in closing off our hearts. You know, ever close off your heart to someone that you wouldn't even make eye contact with them? Or ever, you know, close your heart to someone and you just would not go near them? Or, if you did, you gave them the cold shoulder and the silent treatment? You know, it's amazing.

And sometimes we close our hearts to people by, you know, thinking negative thoughts about them – or even hostile thoughts. Or engaging in what I sometimes call revenge fantasies. Like, ever close your eyes and you smile as you see them choking on a chicken bone? [Congregants laugh] Or ... Neither have I; I'm just saying ... [Congregants laugh] Or them getting a flat tire? Or, you know, their relationship breaks up and they get a divorce? You know, there are all kinds of things.

And we close our hearts in all kinds of ways where we literally withhold love from others. We withhold kindness. We withhold helping others. And somethings we end up talking about and gossiping about them behind their back. It's almost like a little child in us says, *“I'll show you! I'll punish you for hurting me. And I'll just keep sending hateful thoughts to you and never talk to you again.”*

And we do these things. If we want to not only forgive, but just find peace and happiness, we need to be willing to open our hearts. Because withholding love and speaking negatively and hatefully towards others only brings us more hurt and more pain. We need to be able to open our heart to send love, to send kindness, to send peace and blessings to others.

Charles Fillmore, the co-founder of Unity, says this: *“Our success in life is directly related to the quality of thoughts that we hold towards others.”* Our success in life is directly related to the quality of thoughts that we hold towards others. Think of some of the quality of thoughts that you hold towards other people in your life.

You know, by rule of consciousness, we cannot pray and wish for good for ourselves and wish ill for others. It does not work! We cannot wish peace and blessings for us and pain and problems for them. You know, what we wish for others, we wish for ourselves. We can't live our lives with a closed-off heart. It will only bring us more hurt and limit and block the very good we are seeking. The only way to live is to open our hearts and to allow that love to flow freely.

So, I ask you: Is there anyone in your life that you've closed your heart off to? Anyone you don't want to make eye in contact with? Anyone that you are thinking and holding negative thoughts or hostile thoughts towards? And the question is: Are you willing to open your heart towards them?

Opening our hearts is one of the most powerful practices. In Buddhism, they say the absolute key to happiness is compassion. It is to open your heart to other people. Open your heart with a desire to understand them, but also a desire to hope and wish for their well-being; for their peace and happiness.

You know, everybody messes up. Everyone acts like a jerk. Everyone does these things. It's never great or wonderful to be on the receiving end of any kind of behavior like that. But what's even worse is punishing ourselves by closing our heart and not opening it to at least have some compassion for the others, as well as compassion for ourselves.

Can you imagine -- are you willing -- to get to that place that you're willing to open your heart to whoever it is that might be outside of it right now? To open your heart to the point to just send them God's love? To send them God's peace? You don't have to send your own! Send God's love for them, instead! [Congregants laugh]

But whatever it is: whatever it takes to open our hearts to be sending good thoughts, loving thoughts. You don't have a clean heart; to have a pure heart, you've got to have an open heart. To have a healed heart, you've got to have an open heart.

In life, they say one or two things are going on: you're either expanding or contracting. You know, the word "heaven" comes from a root word that actually means expansion. The experience of heaven is the expanding of our hearts; the expanding of love; the expanding of compassion and understanding. It's the expanding of our awareness.

And "hell" -- from the word Hades -- means to be blind. It means to not see. It means to cut off or close off. And when we close off our hearts to resentment, we block the very peace and joy and love and the abundant life that we are all seeking.

The second step in forgiveness is: are we willing to open our hearts?

And then the last one is: Are we **WILLING TO MOVE FORWARD**? Everybody remember the movie, "Princess Bride"? You remember Inigo Montoya? He was a swordsman whose -- there was a six -fingered man that killed his father -- and he was out for revenge. He was going and kill that person. And finally at the end of the movie, he finds the person. He always used the same line: *"My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."* And he found the guy, and he kept saying the line over and over again.

And so, he kills the guy. And then Wesley, the star, says to Inigo after he has slain the man -- the six-fingered guy -- he says, *"What are you going to do now?"*

And Inigo says, *"You know, it's strange. I've been in the revenge business so long, I don't know what to do with the rest of my life."*

And that sounds sad, and it's almost unbelievable. But sometimes we spend so much of our lives hating, blaming, resenting and closing our hearts off, that we begin to repeat this cycle. And we sometimes don't know how to break out of it to be happier, or to allow ourselves to be happy, or allow ourselves to be free.

Sometimes we keep repeating these patterns and putting that energy of resentment or negativity out so much that it actually becomes an excuse for not succeeding. An excuse for, *"I can't try; it's that guy's fault I don't have this or that."*

Wayne Dyer -- in his book, "Excuses Be Gone" -- says forgiveness expands our future. That, when we forgive, it actually allows us to move forward to new possibilities; to have new experiences; to create new goals. There's a whole new world!

Imagine taking that energy of resentment, transforming it, and then utilizing it to create something good. To create something better.

Let me give an extreme but a powerful and wonderful example. Nelson Mandela -- after being released from prison after 27 years -- left fully forgiving everyone. He literally had a clarity of vision that he wanted to help end apartheid and that he wanted to create reconciliation -- racial reconciliation -- in his home in South Africa. He was freed at 71 years old. At 74, he became the first president of South Africa. He won the Nobel Peace Prize. And he helped to start some of the healing for his own country. Because he forgave!

Imagine 27 years of resentment and how much energy that would be. He transformed that to do so much good in this world. And even though he's gone, he is still considered an amazing statesman and one of our greatest leaders.

So my question for you is: What can you see yourself transforming through forgiveness and creating new? What would a better life look like for you? What would greater happiness and success look like for you?

One of my favorite Scriptures is from the Book of Philippians, Chapter 3, Verse 13-14: *"Forgetting what is behind, and straining forward to what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which I have been called heavenwardly in Christ Jesus."*

And it is saying: Are you ready to press on? And then move forward? Forget all of the resentments of the past and the things that didn't work? What are you here to create? What is the prize that you are here to win? What is the difference that you are here to make? And are you willing to move forward towards it?

Forgiveness frees us so we can see clearly a new vision, a new possibility, and greater experiences for our lives. If we want to forgive, we've got to be willing to move forward and to move on with our lives to something greater and something better.

A preacher gives a lengthy sermon on the importance of forgiving one's enemies. At the middle of the service, he asked for a show of hands from the congregation of who was willing to forgive their enemies, and half the hands went up. He preached a little more, and he asked the question again: How many people are willing to forgive their enemies? And three quarters of the room. And then he went on for a few more minutes, and his final passionate plea: How many people are willing to forgive their enemies? And everyone raised their hands, except this elderly lady.

The preacher approached her and said, *"Mrs. Jones you're 96 years old and you look sweet -- like a loving woman. Don't you have any enemies to forgive?"* She says, *"No, I don't."* The preacher says, *"That's amazing! Please come to the front and tell the congregation your secret."* So she walks to the front, grabs her microphone, and says, *"My secret is I outlived all those old hags."* [Congregants laugh]

Forgiveness.

If you want to have more peace; if you want to have greater health; if you want more happiness; if you want to have closer and healthier relationships; and want to feel good about yourself, you need more forgiveness. We all need more forgiveness. More of the freeing, healing, transforming, life-changing power of forgiveness.

And it just starts with one little thing. Are you willing? Are you willing to let go? Are you willing to open your heart? Are you willing to move forward? Let's do our forgiveness work, because forgiveness is powerful. Forgiveness has a huge impact. Because forgiveness truly is the heart of the matter.

God bless you all.

