

“Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

August 8, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

Today’s grab bag topic is forgiveness. Easy right? Well, maybe

The requester, had some subtopics for me to noodle out:

Is it necessary?

Does emphasis on forgiveness detract from the responsibility to atone?

Now it’s starting to get complicated.

Here’s some more questions I would add to the mix.

Is forgiving debts the same thing as forgiving sins?

I mean, the Lord’s Prayer can be translated as forgive us our debts, our trespasses or our sins.

While forgiveness is the constant in all three adaptations, do they mean the same thing?

I know there are some sins easier to forgive than others.

There are some things that people have done that are downright awful, and the memories of their actions dwell in a persistent loop in our psyches. And some of us linger in a toxic trauma loop.

Are there unforgivable sins?

What if someone does not repent? Isn’t that kind of forgiveness a kind of control? Are some counting on our bleeding-heartedness so they get off scot free?

Here’s one for you. If someone has refused to get a vaccine and transmits the virus to someone you love, are you quick to forgive? How about if they remain stubborn in their refusal and you are sure they are making others sick? Do they merit our forgiveness?

There is a forgiver and a forgivee. Are we forgiven ones forever indebted to the forgiver?

Is forgiveness an obligation, or is it a gift?

Do we treat it differently if it’s an obligation than it is if it’s a gift. I remember a parent saying to an unruly child, “you need to say you’re sorry.” The child responded, “It would mean a whole lot more if I actually was sorry.”

What if the person whom we need to forgive is ourselves? Are we quicker to forgive others than we are to forgive ourselves?

Jesus was asked by his disciples: How many times do we have to forgive someone? Is seven times enough? I mean seven is a complete Biblical number. 7 days in creation, seven days in a week, seven bowls, trumpets, candlesticks, seven deadly sins. Lucky seven. Actually seven seems like a lot of times, especially for the same transgression. But Jesus really upset the disciples when he said we need to forgive not only seven times, but 70 x 7 times. That’s 490 for those of you doing the math in your head. Make forgiveness habitual, seems to be the implication.

Ann Lamott said that to refuse forgiveness is like taking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. We load up on the toxicity of some wrong done to us and we wait for the other person to finally get it or atone or come to their senses. While we wait, we become entwined with their actions and their repentance is the only thing that can save us. Forgiveness is not about their change in behavior, it’s about our change in behavior—the only real antidote to their poison.

Char Follett used to say that forgiveness is granting yourself permission to not let someone have free rent in your brain.

7 times seventy times. I have enough trouble with one time.

It turns out I'm not all that different from people. Even people of Biblical times. Matthew drives this point home in the parable that follows Jesus' terse statement about abundant habitual forgiveness and the hard work that it entails.

We have been told by those who have wronged us, that if we were good Christians, we would forgive them. What that too often means is to let them off the hook.

Bill Herzog who wrote the book *Parables as subversive speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, contends that this and many other parables have a vastly different meaning when read from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. Herzog challenged us to read the parables and Jesus' method of exposing the brutality of the world and siding with the poor.

According to Herzog, Matthew added the depiction of God as the allegorical forgiving one in order to soften Jesus' harsh words. "If he had been the kind of teacher popularly portrayed in the North American church, a master of the inner life, teaching the importance of spirituality and a private relationship with God, he would have been supported by the Romans as part of their rural pacification program." (p.27). In other words, there would have been no reason to execute him as a revolutionary, which is for whom crucifixion was reserved.

So let's listen to the parable again and see what it might be saying from a different angle.

Jesus tells of a king who goes to settle accounts with his underlings. Now the language gets in the way here because underlings of the king are called slaves. In point of fact, there are different levels of slaves here. The king was the elite of the elite and likely owned a lot of land. The king usually got his land by collecting from others, a system of debt which kept him in his place and all of the others in theirs. It was literally impossible for people to pay off their debts. So the kings got richer and the people in debt became forever indentured.

In Biblical times, there were to be no permanent landowners except for God. In fact, every 50 years, the Torah commands that all of the land should be redistributed amongst the people. All debts must be forgiven and all slaves shall be set free. Can you imagine what that would look like here? How would we work out the math of the reparations from generations of slavery and theft of land and wages. I guess that's a different sermon, but reparations and forgiveness are related.

Anyway, by the time Jesus was around, Torah's jubilee commandment was seen as a quaint reminder of the past. A nice idea, but completely impractical and downright communistic. Okay, they might not have used communistic, but they may have smeared it as impractical. I mean there's only so much forgiveness one community can take. And yet when we pray forgive us our debts as forgive our debtors week after week, we're making a nod to the Jubilee ideal of equal treatment and an end to both generational debt and generational wealth. I know I'm fussin' here, but that's what it means.

Starting in verse 23 the king goes to settle accounts with his underlings. The first slave owed a lot of money to the king. 10,000 talents to be exact. A talent is equal to one year's wages. So the slave owed 10,000 years of wages. An impossible sum. So the king did what kings do: threatened to sell him, his family, possessions and livestock as if that would put a dent in his debt.

In the parable the slave fell on his knees and begged the king for mercy, or at least an eviction moratorium. The king liked when people knelt at his feet. It made him feel even more important. And in a rare case of generosity he had pity on him and forgave his debt. Maybe he had his press agents available to tell what a generous king he was. Notice that he didn't forgive everyone, only this one person. He was the slave's own personal messiah. It would be so good if the story ended there. But it doesn't.

He goes to his co-workers. The gospel calls them fellow slaves. He doesn't know what to do with his new-found liberation. He settles into his old patterns. He seizes one of his co-workers by the neck and demands that he pay his debt. It's a smaller debt that the king had forgiven, only 100 denarii. A denarius is one day's wages. He was forgiven 10,000 years wages and yet still demands 100 days wages from his brother manager. The one in debt gets on his knees and begs for mercy only to be rebuffed and thrown into jail.

The manager shows that the meanness of the system is still infecting him. The other slaves ratted him out to the king and the king tortures the one whom he had forgiven. The moral of the story seems to be, don't be like that guy or God will punish you. John Dominic Crossan says that the image of God the torturer is a difficult image. Crossan says "I might fear this God, but why would I worship this God?"

Bill Herzog thinks Jesus told parables like this one to spark debate and to stir people up to look not only at their own lives, but also at the world in which they lived. There is plenty to think about as we look at this parable, including our very real need to forgive one another. Herzog called the chapter on this parable, "What if the Messiah Came and Nothing Changed?"

Forgiveness in this parable is more about economics than interpersonal wrong-doing. It's about a power dynamic.

Remember that Jesus was speaking to the people on the margins. Kings tend to do what is in the interest of the king. And the king in this story tried mercy one time and it didn't work as well as torture. So the king went back to his old ways. At this point the poor listeners, slaves of one king or another said, Yes, lord. That's the way it is. They forgive one time and then take it back. But you, be better than that. Be better than the king and his underlings. Don't even compare yourselves with people who can't forgive and let it stick. You need to forgive and have it mean something.

Forgive not one time, not seven times, but 70 times seven times. You need to live by another set of rules. God came in Jesus to say that we can find a better way.

And Jesus is saying that we ought to be better than kings and their underlings.

And in true enigmatic fashion, he leaves it there and asks us to imagine what a world might look like where we are beholden to a different set of rules.

Where the first shall be last and the last shall be first

Where the meek inherit the earth

Where peacemakers instead of warmongers are called God's children

Where all people have enough to eat, enough water to drink and a roof over their heads.

Where there is no more debilitating debt.

Where we don't have to fall on our knees to appease one in power to grant us mercy

Where people are judged not by their indebtedness but by their mercy.

So, yes, we are to forgive. Jesus said so. But forgiveness and forgetting are not the same thing. It's about taking your power back. It's easier to forgive if someone has repented, but their repentance is not necessary.

It's about not getting stuck in the toxic soup of rage about another's actions. It's about directing your energy in a different direction. Sometimes that means removing yourself from an unhealthy relationship.

Sometimes it means forgiving yourself for the ways that you could have done better.

Sometimes it means telling your truth, even if it makes your voice shake. Sometimes it means dusting off your feet and moving on.

Alli Doubek said that "Forgiveness is not about absolving anyone else of what they may have done. It is about not letting it control you anymore."

Is forgiveness necessary? I think so, not for another's sake, but for yours. It's about wrestling back control of your life. And it's not easy. It takes trial and error. It sometimes takes seven times, sometimes seventy times seven times. But when you do, you become freer to be the person God has created and that God celebrates. And that is a blessing to everyone.