

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
17 September 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

I remember growing up with a close family relative of my mother who was being seriously abused by her husband. Every few months or so, my mother would break into the family dynamics, simply by showing up, helping her relative pack a few bags, and taking her to our house. During this respite, our relative would recover her health, gain her strength, acquire a new wardrobe, improve in mental health, and return to the smart, incisive, funny, and sweet lady she had always been. But then, she would pack up all her belongings and return to her husband. For her it was a Christian duty emphasized by her local priest. She had to forgive her husband as many times as the Lord requested. The duty of a wife is to offer her sacrifice to God in prayer. Marriage is a life-long process and “For better or for worse” demanded her return. She would go back and things would be ok for awhile, but eventually, my mother would have to go back to her rescue. She died at a young age, not so much of physical injuries as much as of emotional, spiritual, and psychiatric illnesses. Doctors said she died of cancer, but I know she died of a broken heart. She died at 49 years of age, a shadow of the vibrant and funny person she had once been.

Today Jesus shatters Peter’s already generous understanding of forgiveness. He asks Jesus if he should forgive as many as 7 times. This would have been unheard of in the culture of the day. To forgive once was charitable and compassionate. To forgive twice showed the incredible generosity of the person. To forgive three times would cause some eyebrows to be raised. People would have been concerned about the sanity of the person. By the fourth time, people would be deeply concerned. They would think of the person as weak, they would ridicule him in the marketplace, they would see him as a man without honor. Peter knows of Jesus’ great generosity and for this reason he presents 7 acts of forgiveness as the absolute maximum anyone should be expected to forgive.

Jesus uses the opportunity to reverse forever the famous “Curse of Lamech” (Genesis 4:23-24). You may recall that when God expels Cain from Paradise for killing Able, God warned that anyone who harmed Cain would be punished seventh-fold. Lamech, one of Cain’s descendants, brags that he has exacted revenge on a young man who offended him in a seven-fold fashion. Lamech says, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech is avenged seventy-sevenfold.” (Genesis 4:23-24). The answer to the question, “How far shall I go to avenge my honor?” would have been “Seventy-sevenfold.” Which truly means, “As long as necessary until the family’s honor has been avenged.” Jesus reverses this curse of Lamech, by demanding that we forgive seventy-sevenfold. This is an impossible number. It is also as though Jesus was saying, “Always!” How often should we forgive? “Always!”

This demand that we forgive always, “Is not congruent with the relentless pursuit of power and privilege that drives our daily social relationships. The pursuit of unlimited forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22) requires a complete break from the arrangements that

govern our everyday life, both in Jesus's time and in ours." (Stanley Saunders, www.workingpreacher.com). We live in a culture of endless retribution, where honor killings are still the norm in many parts of the world. We still practice "Vendetta", and in our own context, we are known for holding grudges and for seeking countless small acts of revenge, which may be subtle, but are just as punishing. "Jesus is calling his community of disciples to participate in undoing the curse of Cain and Lamech that has kept their offspring trapped in spasms of envy, hatred, violence, and retribution across the generations to this day." (Ibid). And to bring this point home he tells them the story of a generous king and a wicked servant. Now, this fairly clear parable is often misunderstood.

The first reason is that the numbers are staggering and many wonder why a king would lend such an enormous amount of money to a servant. 1 Talent would be equivalent to 15 years of daily wages for the average worker. Multiply that by 10,000 and you get 150,000 years of daily wages. The situation gets worse if you multiply this number by the number of days in a year. Why would a king lend this kind of money to a servant? Well, this may not be a loan in the way we understand loans. The second problem is the "loan" the servant made to the other slave. Why would a poor servant lend another as much as 100 denarii, or 100 days worth of wages? This makes no sense. Well, let me try to explain:

You must think of a pyramid to fully understand how the economy of First Century Palestine works. This pyramid ensures that money, goods, and services flow from the bottom to the top. A king with 10,000 acres, for example, may have 100 small groups of share-croppers, renters, taxable households, producers of goods like dairy products, meat, fruits, and vegetables, etc. Each one of these groups may be overseen by a high ranking servant or agent. These 100 agents or servants may themselves be divided into 10 groups overseen by 10 middle management servants, who themselves may report to one chief servant who handles the entire operation. The 100 servants at the bottom collect all taxes, money, and goods from their clients, take a portion for themselves, and pass the rest to the next level up. Those servants take a portion for themselves and pass the rest up to their chief supervisor. He, in turn, takes a portion for himself and passes the rest to the king. How much each level supervisor gets depends on production, but also on how much they can get away with. The chief servant in our story may have been skimming of the top for years by the time the King discovered the problem. Adding all the unpaid money to the king for 20 or 30 years could add to 10,000 talents. This figure would have been impossible to pay.

It would have been better to forgive and get the chief servant in the king's debt than having to replace such a valuable worker. After the act of forgiveness the king expected a more loyal and dedicated worker. His forgiveness would be seen as a Jubilee by all. The forgiveness of all debts that happens every 50 years or so. During Jubilee all land must be allowed to rest, all debts must be forgiven, all slaves must be freed, and the people should go into a year of atonement. (Leviticus 25). What this means is that after hearing of the great act of forgiveness to the chief servant, all his clients, farmers, employees, and debtors would have expected their own debts to be forgiven. The king's honor would be highly praised for his generosity in instituting Jubilee ahead of schedule. This would have resulted in great celebration and increased loyalty towards the king.

The chief servant, however, does not have the king's honor in mind when he refuses to extend the year of Jubilee to all, and goes back to business as usual. He denies others his master's generosity, perhaps believing that only he is deserving of the king's grace. This, of course brings dishonor to the king, as he would appear unking, capricious, prone to favoritism, even cruel to many. By refusing to extend the king's generosity, the chief servant binds the king to actions he doesn't want to take. He wants to forgive in great generosity, but the chief servant wants business as usual. The servant's lack of generosity causes the king to revert to an expected and normal way of doing business. He passes judgement on his chief servant and by doing so he vindicates his honor, otherwise he would be seen as weak and weak kings often invite revolution and insurrection with their actions.

The message here is clear for Matthew's listeners. We have been forgiven our very lives, shouldn't we then forgive others for their generally small offenses? God has erased our debt, and this debt was un-payable. Shouldn't we forgive those whose debts to us are so very little? The answer, of course, is that there is nothing anyone can do to us that is greater than the offenses against God and our brothers and sisters for which we have been forgiven. We say it in the "Our Father" every day, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." This is the Biblical expectation. Forgiveness is the other side of the "Love of Neighbor" coin. We cannot say we love, unless we are able to forgive.

Of course we have Christ as our example. A short time after this passage, Christ himself died on a cross for the forgiveness of sinners everywhere. But, how about my close relative and the thousands like her. Must we continue to accept physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse every day because our Lord demands that we forgive? Should we believe this is the lot in our lives as Christians? Should we remain as the rugs others step on daily? The answer is NO! Forgiveness is not the willing acceptance of abuse. Forgiveness is not the suppression of talents, skills, abilities, and gifts to protect the ego of another person who feels threatened and lashes out because of our abilities. Forgiveness is not the passive acceptance of a status quo that often keeps us subjugated and bound to unjust social structures. Forgiveness is not the daily acceptance of betrayal.

Forgiveness is the loosening in our hearts of the chains of hatred, revenge, and bitterness the actions of others have caused us, so we may be enjoy the freedom for which we were created. Forgiveness is also the pardoning of offenses and, when possible, it is the restoration of a broken relationship. In this second case, forgiveness is always the right of the person grieved and it demands a change of heart in the offender. But, whether we forgive in our hearts with the purpose of breaking the chains of bitterness and anger, or whether we forgive as part of a process of relationship-restoration, it doesn't mean that we must allow ourselves to go back for more abuse. Sometimes it is necessary to sever ties and forgive from a distance. In any case, these are personal decisions. What we need to know today is that forgiveness is possible and Christ gives us the strength to forgive if we are willing. May God continue to bless you, amen!