

## Forgiveness

King of Glory Lutheran Church  
Year A: Pentecost 16 Mt 18:21-35  
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry  
September 16-17, 2023

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

*God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit helps us learn the practice of forgiveness. There is a three-step practice we can follow which will free us from our own pain.*

Christian teacher, Bob George tells the story of speaking to inmates at a federal prison about forgiveness. With him were several inmate volunteers to assist in counseling other inmates. While in prison, David had come to know Jesus and his heart had softened greatly towards himself and others.

During the seminar, David was hoping everyone was listening to the forgiveness speaker because he knew they needed it! Then he turned to see the one man he hated more than anyone. The only thing that kept David from hiring a hit man to kill him was the chance David would get caught. That man was now an inmate

like David. All those negative emotions of the hurt surfaced quickly in David. He sat there struggling about what to do. He felt the hurt, but he also felt God's love touching his heart.

‘Even though I could look back at what this man had done to me, I also remembered I wasn’t lily-white either. The Lord had (forgiven me). Frankly, I couldn’t see that there was very much difference between me and this other guy if you looked at us from God’s perspective.’

During the intermission, David went up to this inmate (who hadn’t seen David yet) and the man almost jumped out of his skin. But David extended his hand and said, “I hope you’re listening. Jesus Christ has changed my life and He can change yours too.” (Grace Stories. Bob George. Harvest House Publishers. Eugene, OR. 2000. Pg 72-74.)

“Forgive us as we have forgive those who sin against us.” We pray that line of the Lord’s Prayer each and every Sunday. Yet many of us haven’t had very helpful teaching about how to actually forgive another person.

Peter and the disciples are asking Jesus to teach them about forgiveness. “How many times shall I forgive, Lord?” asks Peter.

What follows is an allegorical parable filled with hyperbole of the most extravagant sort...to make Jesus’ point. The King is God who forgives the debt of a slave. It’s a huge debt and literally speaking, makes absolutely no sense. The slave is in debt 10,000 talents; 15 years of work. No King would allow a slave to get into that much debt. Impossible! Unattainable! Ridiculous! But that debt is forgiven by the king. Wiped clean. God’s forgiveness of you and me.

The first slave is walking home, the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders, he runs into a another slave buddy, who owes him 100 denarii. One denarii equaled about one day’s wage. It would take about 11 weeks of work for the second slave to pay the first slave back. That’s not a small amount –but in light of what the first slave himself has just been forgiven of? The first and forgiven slave throws his buddy into prison. The irony is palpable.

The last two verses of the text say this: <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him (first slave) over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Forgiveness is important to God. God's kingdom is driven by forgiveness. God's forgiveness of us through Jesus... and God's expectation of us to forgive. Our experience of God's forgiveness and our experience of forgiving one another is central to our life of faith.

Let's take a brief look at the nuts and bolts of forgiving another. Lewis Smedes, author of The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How (Ballantine Books. Random House Ballantine Publishing Group. 1996) is one of the best books on forgiveness you'll ever read. Smedes writes about what forgiveness is and isn't. He says that there are three steps that every person goes through in forgiving another.

The first step is to "rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us." (Pg 6) When an individual hurts us, we often want to hold onto the hurt they caused. Yet in doing so, we begin to see that individual only as what their hurtful actions. They become less than human and solely the sinner who wronged us. Think of it this way. Someone hurt you deeply. In the days and weeks after the injury, what do you call to mind? The specific word or action that was hurtful? Or the wholeness of the person, flawed and human just like us?

Many times we don't want to see that friend or spouse or boss as a person. We fear if we do, then the act of forgiving will mean nothing and change nothing. Here's the truth. We don't diminish a wrong through forgiving. The person doesn't need to still have the same relationship with us...we can choose what that relationship looks like. But what about forgive and forget? Not possible. God gave us minds to remember.

What does change in the act of forgiving, is our inner understanding of the person. They are flawed just as we are. They are God's child, as we are. As Pastor Courtney Steitz says, "Most people are doing the best they can with what they have and who they are." Step one: rediscover the humanity of the one who hurt you.

Step two: "Surrendering our right to get even." (Pg 7) Most of us love to hold onto a hurt because the anger feels good. We don't want a flippant apology, so licking our wounds feels better. The anger festers like smoldering coals of a hot fire. We want the other person to hurt like we do. We want to get back at someone. "They're going to get it!" Thus, we choose to nurture the pain instead of letting it go.

In this second step, we acknowledge our pain and then open our hands to release it. The other person may never know they hurt you or the pain you're in. Perhaps they do. At the end of the day, our desire to get revenge (even on the smallest scale), is only hurting ourselves. In surrendering our right to get even, we open the curtains to the sun's warm light again. We can feel the divine breeze on our face instead of hiding from God's Holy Spirit under hat and scarf.

In this step, Smedes makes a distinction between 'vengeance' and 'justice.' 'Vengeance is our own pleasure of seeing someone who hurt us getting it back and then some. Justice, is when someone pays a fair penalty for wronging another.' (Pg 7-8) If we listen to victim's families after a verdict is handed down, we can hear in their words, whether they were out for vengeance or justice. Step two: "Surrendering our right to get even."

Step three: Revising our feelings (Pg 10). Smedes says that once we see the humanity in our offender and we can give up our own feelings of needing to come out on top, then we actually begin to feel differently. It might be hesitant at first. But then eventually we desire good things for our offender. They get remarried or earn a promotion. A small part of us begins to be glad or even thankful for them. God's healing has come to us.

These three steps are foundational to learning the practice of forgiving, the art of forgiving. There once was a doctor who said, "Doctors practice medicine because every patient reacts differently." I think forgiveness is the same. Each situation with each person will touch us differently.

Yet, as we open ourselves to God's guidance and comfort, the Holy Spirit will help us practice forgiveness. If we stand with hands shut, we can neither receive nor give. If our hearts and spirits are shut towards another, neither can we receive God's forgiveness and love. Forgiveness is the heart of our trust in God and our love for another. Amen.

*Talent was worth fifteen years of a laborer's wage; a denarius was one day's wage.*

*Now remember that St. Matthew is committed to deep discipleship. Matthew wants us to know how to walk the walk and talk the talk. So he doesn't cut corners – he calls it as he sees it. But Matthew also exaggerates things to the point of overstatement, embellishing and amplifying so that we know just how important a topic is!*

*But a quick look at the story Jesus tells demonstrates that this forgiveness thing is no small matter. Landowners owned the land and everything on it – including the slaves. Apparently, the slave owed his landowner 10,000 talents. Keep in mind one talent equaled about 130 lbs. of silver. It would have taken a laborer about 15 years to earn one talent. This slave owed 10,000 talents. That would be about 150,000 years of labor. Impossible! Unattainable! Ridiculous! But that debt is forgiven by the king. Wiped clean. Gone! Incredible!*

*So this guy turns around and as he's walking home, the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders, he runs into a buddy, who owes him 100 denarii. One denarii equaled about one day's wage. The slave is due about 100 days, about 11 weeks of work from his fellow slave. That's not a small amount –but in light of what he himself has just been forgiven of? Yet – he throws his buddy into prison. The irony is palpable.*

Lewis Smedes, author of The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How (Ballantine Books. Random House Ballantine Publishing Group. 1996)

In answering Peter's request for help in understanding how far forgiveness needs to go Jesus teaches that God's forgiveness surpasses both our deserving and our comprehension of it; we who have first been forgiven must, therefore and thereupon, forgive those who have wronged us so much more lightly.

The point of this parable is clear, and its demands both in the context of the Gospel of Matthew and its application in our congregations today is urgent. Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love of one another. Forgiveness, which we receive from God our King in the person of Jesus is what our King expects from his subjects in their dealings with each other.

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors; as a prayer this puts the emphasis on what we will receive in turn for the forgiveness we have offered. Forgive your brother or sister from your heart; the parable turns the tables, teaching us that we have been first forgiven and encouraging us to forgive in turn. Taken together, this is a composite picture of the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom we practice, both of which are driven by forgiveness.