

Matthew 18: 23-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

March 10, 2019

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When I was pretty new to being part of a church, and I was still trying to figure out what I believed and if I believed anything about God at all, I spent a beautiful fall weekend with some of the women of the church I was attending. We had great weather, wonderful food (not cooked by any of us), and a lot of down time just to talk to each other. There were three generations represented and we were all delighted to be relieved of our responsibilities for the weekend. There were no phones or kids or husbands or errands or soccer games. We talked about life, the fun parts and the not so fun parts. There was so much to learn from each other and it was really fascinating to hear each other's stories and appreciate that all of those stories were being woven together in that time and place.

I haven't thought about that weekend in a very long time, until this week when Lent started. In my own reflections, I've been thinking about the rhythm of life and how bothersome it is to me that we have so little control over so much of it. And that what we can control is how we respond to what happens. I ran across these words, which I have found meaningful, from author and social justice activist, L.R. Knost, who wrote, "Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful." The idea that amazing, ordinary, and awful can all be beautiful strikes me as especially important for Lent, when

we are asked to reflect on our lives and consider how we want the next chapter of our stories to be.

For the next 6 weeks, we are going to look at some of the stories the author of Matthew attributed to Jesus. We will see that they are ordinary stories about ordinary people, situations, and things. We'll talk about how Jesus used the stories and how the author of Matthew used them. We'll talk about how we might weave them into our lives today, to guide our self- reflection and help us respond to life's amazing, ordinary, and awful.

\*Click Title Slide and animation will happen.

I hope, in these stories of Jesus, we will gather something that will help us live into the extraordinary lives for which God created us.

This week's story is an interesting place to start. It's not what I would call an easy story. The author of Matthew has placed it as part of a sermon he constructed about how to get along and keep order within the church. The word that is translated as "*church*" in this passage is the Greek word "*ecclesia*", which means "*called out of*". It was a term from Greek politics and was the name of the assembly of citizens who came together to vote to do the work of the government. So, early on, what we now call the "church" took its name from the idea that people who came together could effect change. *An ecclesia is a group of people who make a difference in their world by working together* (Marci Glass, [https://marciglass.com/2019/03/09/forgiving-people/?fbclid=IwAR1SJ2x-bP-CtHN051iM-4ILBrCJ7VmBQyNvQ57S7o\\_hQUXJluO5DV0jg](https://marciglass.com/2019/03/09/forgiving-people/?fbclid=IwAR1SJ2x-bP-CtHN051iM-4ILBrCJ7VmBQyNvQ57S7o_hQUXJluO5DV0jg)).

The sermon begins with the text we looked at on Ash Wednesday in which the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In that passage, it is clear the disciples' understanding of kingdom is an imperial view, one in which someone was at the top and

everyone else was not. It's all they knew. Jesus' answer was surprising to them, as he told them if they wanted to be great, they must become humble like a child.

The sermon also addresses a number of other community-related things; how to deal with vulnerable members of the community, how to discipline the ones who failed to live up to the group norms, and Jesus' response to Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven (or seventy times seven) times." Jesus' answer is exaggerated, but his point was, followers of Jesus ought to keep forgiving each other. And then Matthew inserted today's story.

I can tell you, Matthew and Jesus used this story very differently and it matters. Let's look at the way Matthew used the parable first. And let's start with the last verse, which is an addition by Matthew and not original to Jesus. It's kind of Matthew's "moral to the story."

\*"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." This is Matthew's clue to us that this story is an allegory and requires interpretation.

Matthew's interpretation, though, based on that last verse, is pretty troubling.

The king (representing God) decided to collect the money owed him. The first slave (representing any one of us) owed the king an amount of money that was unimaginable. One scholar I read this week did the math. 1 talent was worth more than 15 years of labor. So, 10,000 talents have been 150,000 years salary. The point is, it's more money than the slave could ever pay back. Initially, the king handed down a harsh punishment, saying he would sell the slave and his family and all their possessions. The slave begged the king for mercy and it was granted. The debt was canceled and the slave went on his way.

Later, the pardoned slave tried to collect money owed from his subordinate who didn't have what he owed either. The subordinate begged for mercy and found none. The slave who was forgiven refused to forgive his subordinate, even though the debt in question was much smaller than the amount he had been forgiven. The forgiven slave had his subordinate thrown in prison until he could repay the debt. Other slaves saw what had happened and told the king. The king's response was anger and he handed the previously forgiven slave over to be tortured. And then Matthew's ending, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

How does this sit with you? Is this what you believe about the nature of God? Do you believe that if you are unable to forgive someone God will have no mercy on you? I don't. Remember, right before the parable, Jesus demanded of Peter almost infinite forgiveness. Why is it that Peter has to keep forgiving and the king (who is supposed to be God in the story) only has to forgive once? Does it make sense that God has a lower standard of forgiveness than Peter? Dr. Bernard Brandon Scott, author of *Reimagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, writes, "Since for Matthew the king is God, what are we to think of divine forgiveness if it is conditional, if it can be taken away? Only because Matthew has made the king God do readers not revolt against a king who demands multiple forgiveness but lashes out at the first failure." Scott ends with, "Obviously, Matthew is not much help in understanding the parable." For Matthew, the point is, forgive other people in the community abundantly, as God has forgiven you...or else.

Jesus used the parable in a very different way, according to Scott. It's important to understand, the characters and situation in the story would have been very familiar to the audience. The people knew very well what a king was like.

The king in the story is not supposed to represent God, but is a king, not a specific king, but a king like Herod. He's a guy who lives to take money from his people. And subordinate to this king, were imperial slaves who collect the money. This is how one person could owe the king the huge sum of 10,000 talents. It was the money he was supposed to have collected from the people. In an ancient writing by Josephus, a Romano-Jewish scholar and historian, he wrote about a sum as large as 10,000 talents that was collected from the people in Galilee, affirming for us that this system of oppressive taxation was very real to the people who would have been listening to Jesus' story.

Anyway, the imperial slave failed to collect the 10,000 talents owed the king. The slave had slaves under him who probably had slaves under them. The whole society was organized like a pyramid, with the person at the top controlling everything and making the vast majority of the money and the people at the bottom with no choice but to participate. The slave fell to the ground and worshiped the king as kings were like gods. He promised to pay everything he owed, which might have been possible given time to help everyone under him understand how bad it would be for them if they didn't collect the necessary money from the people. But in a really strange twist, the king had compassion on him and forgave his debt. Jesus' audience would not have seen that coming. Compassion from a ruler would have been very unexpected.

The forgiven slave was released and right away met a fellow slave, who was subordinate to him and who owed him a hundred denarii. This is much less than 10,000 talents, but it is still a lot of money, especially for a Galilean peasant. The average for one day of work was 1 denarius. So, 100 is a hundred days labor. He begged his superior for time to pay, but the request was denied and he was sent to prison. Other slaves saw what happened and told the king. He summoned the once forgiven slave, "You wicked slave." No compassion there. He turned him over to

be killed. And Jesus' story ends there with no explanation, but the people Jesus was talking to would have gotten it.

If this story isn't about God's forgiveness, what's it about?

Why did the king go from compassion to anger so quickly? According to Dr. Scott, it's not a matter of economics or justice. The slave, in not following the king's example, has violated the king's honor, making a mockery of his forgiveness. Scott wrote, "By forgiving his client, the king intended to lessen the debts of his entire kingdom, but the slave has suspended the process at its very beginning. In order to protect his honor, the master will wipe out the shame this slave has brought upon him."

For the Jewish people in first century Galilee, who thought their Messiah would be like a king, Jesus says, "No, that will never work." The system of kingship is flawed. Because it is authoritarian, because one person is over and above everyone else and has complete control, the system will forever be unstable. It will always be at the whim of the one with the power and there will be a constant need to protect and grab for power. The system is flawed because people with ultimate power and no accountability cannot be trusted. That kind of power is reserved for God and God alone.

This parable condemns our efforts to organize ourselves around the model of empire. The message for us isn't forgive others or God won't forgive us. The message is, forgive because only then will we experience the true kin-dom of God. Only when we don't owe each other anything, when broken relationships are repaired, only when we are equal partners, when there aren't some who have a lot and others who have nothing, will the kin-dom of God that Jesus talked about come to be. This parable is not about us as individuals, it is about the people of God working to bring about a different kind of world, a world

where forgiveness can be distributed equally, not just when it benefits some.

Getting this interpretation right is important for our lives today because this parable, when it has been misinterpreted, has contributed to a widespread understanding especially among Christians, that people are to forgive freely and unconditionally, no matter what, and it must be done right away. That is an unrealistic expectation and it is hurtful and unfair. People who are hurting should not be hurt more by our insistence that they forgive their offender right now, in all circumstances. If you are struggling to forgive someone, know that you are loved. Be gentle with yourself.

“Forgive and forget” is advice handed out freely and is sometimes dangerous. Even when we are able to forgive other people, forgetting the offense can put ourselves or others at risk. We should not forget what someone did that purposely harmed us. Forgiving someone does not mean we should behave as if the offense never happened and it does not mean we should trust the person who hurt us or risk our own safety.

I want to be clear that, we are called to try to forgive, but it is not easy, fast, or always possible.

\*There are things that human beings do to one another that may be unforgivable, especially if the perpetrator walks away without confession, repentance, restitution, and a dramatic change in their way of being in the world. These things are important to understand, not only when we have been hurt, but also when we have hurt someone else.

The person who has hurt (or offended) someone else, must confess what he/she has done, in detail, all of it.

I said hurtful things. Explain.

I physically harmed you. Explain.

I took advantage of you. Explain.

It is hard to forgive someone who doesn't own what they have done.

The offender must repent. Speak words of apology and make it clear they are turning from their behavior.

I'm sorry. I understand how my behavior affected you, giving details. I have stopped drinking/smoking. I am taking anger management courses. I am seeing a counselor and going to a support group. I will not put myself in those situations again.

The offender must try to make it right. In some cases, this is not possible. But in most, there are ways to partially repair the situation.

Demonstrate long term change in behavior, habits, way of being in the world. This is one of the reasons forgiveness on big things takes time. It will take time to demonstrate that lasting change has occurred.

We are called to forgive when we have been hurt. We are called to seek forgiveness when we have hurt someone else. The connection between God's forgiveness and our forgiving others is not that if we don't, God won't. The connection is that God's willingness to forgive ought to serve as a model for us and encourage us to work on forgiveness, even when it's hard.

Forgiveness is an extraordinary gift we can give ourselves. Rabbi Harold Kushner once told a story that speaks to this. He said, "A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and her three young children. She says to me, 'Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies while he is living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?' I answer her, 'I am not asking you to



forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive him because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of your life physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you are hurting yourself.'"

Forgiveness, no matter how long it takes, always brings the world closer to wholeness and bringing wholeness to a fragmented world is why we are here. Amen.