

Forgiveness

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church^[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[b] times.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents^[c] was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;^[d] and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[k] from your heart."

The (Manipulative?) Power of Forgiveness – Ashland

Matthew 18:21-35

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In one of my previous pastorates, I had one of those experiences you try to prepare for but hope you never have to face. I had to fire a church employee for sexual misconduct with a minor. In this case it happened to be the church custodian who was also a congregation member. As the information unfolded and gradually became clearer that's what was happening, I, along with some help from the personnel committee, attempted to use the formula for a "church member who sins" from last week's gospel reading to address the situation. When I noticed him spending an unusual amount of time with the youth group, I went and talked to him myself. When it was observed that he was a little "handsy" with a specific young person, I took members of the Personnel Committee with me to have another conversation. And then when the grandmother of the victim came to me with information that he had indeed exposed himself her grand-daughter, he was fired, reported to child protective services, and asked not to come back to the church. It was straight up Matthew 18, but earlier in the chapter, from verses 15-20.

What I wasn't prepared for was what happened next – which was the direct jump made to this week's text. Aren't we supposed to forgive him 70 times 7? At the time, for me, that wasn't just a "no" – that was an "Oh hell no." I couldn't believe what I was hearing about how he was the best custodian we'd ever had. And how much he would be missed on our mission trips. And from the family itself, that he was a trusted family friend and they hated to lose his friendship. Initially, I was horrified, but then I realized that this was not as unusual as one might think.

How many times have I watched as pastors were "moved on" rather than being directly confronted for their illegal or immoral behavior? How many times have I known of churches held

hostage for decades by the bullying behaviors of one or two members which were always forgiven? How many times do we say, “forgive them for they know not what they do” when we know good and well that they know EXACTLY what they are doing, and they are absolutely getting away with it?

Let’s remember that Peter’s inquiry in this text doesn’t come out of nowhere; it’s a follow up question. Jesus has just explained a straight forward formula for how to confront and rectify the situation if a member of the church sins against you. And Peter wants to know – just how often should I forgive? Because forgiveness is hard, and the kind of honest reconciliation Jesus was proposing makes it even harder.

Peter is giving us an incredible gift, the chance to hear how Jesus responds to this spectacular question. We all want to know THAT answer. If following Jesus is all about love and forgiveness, we could use some practical instruction on how to do it. When the situation presents itself that we have to confront someone directly in their sin, and then justice and forgiveness go head to head, I tend to want a little more justice please, a little more fairness for the victim, and a sense that the punishment does indeed fit the crime. Those folks in my past church that jumped directly to forgiveness, far too quickly in my opinion, made my head spin, and it probably signaled the beginning of my end as the pastor of that congregation. They were playing too loose with things that matter. I’m all about love and mercy, but that’s what I would call “sweep it under the rug” forgiveness. You see, that church had an image to uphold as a predominantly white, predominantly liberal, Lake Wobegon kind of congregation, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. Choices were made to protect an image, rather than protect a child. Now, perhaps that’s not a completely fair assessment, and certainly that wouldn’t

include the thoughts and opinions of everyone who worshiped there – but it sure felt that I was outnumbered or at least out-voiced in my way of looking at things.

I tell this story not to gossip about a past church – but because it is a story of a deep disturbance within the Presbyterian tribe, our well-educated, mostly white, often privileged Christian tribe. Unfortunately, being in this system long enough has taught me some big fat lies about what forgiveness is. Some of those lies may cross lines of race, education, denomination, theological leanings, or socio-economic status, but having not researched all the details, I can't adequately speak to the subtle nuances of understanding forgiveness that aren't my own, so I'll let you decide for yourself if you have bought into the same fabrications or not as I expose for you my own misunderstandings. It took a direct confrontation with my church to begin to feel ill at ease at what I thought were the direct and unquestioned teachings of Jesus.

It all goes back to that 70 times 7 - Peter's answer from Jesus. In my Christian upbringing, I was taught that I was supposed to forgive, a lot. And I think church people do forgive, a lot, maybe too much, when the misdeeds come from the people that we know. And it's completely true that Jesus is answering this question specifically about fellow church members. How often should I forgive someone who comes from my church? His answer is, a bunch. More than you think you should. But when it comes to someone outside the fold of my narrative, does the forgiveness come as readily? I dare say that it doesn't. For one of the more benign examples, *The Today Show* can run a story on a white cohort of "marijuana Moms" who say that smoking pot helps them become better parents – while black young men who smoke marijuana – well, I don't really have to tell you what kind of parents they are presumed to be, do I? I was encouraged to believe that forgiveness should come easy to people "like me," and in the courts and in our congregations, it often does. The benefit of the doubt is a real thing – unless you are already presumed guilty. I was taught that if you believe

in Jesus and go to a church like mine, forgiveness just comes with the territory, and with that forgiveness comes easy exoneration. There aren't many consequences. And to be forgiven, you don't really have to work for it or even want it all that much. Then forgiveness starts to become tacit permission to do anything and changes our understanding of sin and evil. And in the most liberal church that I served, the definitions of sin and evil didn't go very deep. Evil was something you boycotted because of some company's policy or unfavorable statement from their CEO, or it was something you protested by going to rallies to protect the environment. Sin wasn't really something you might have to deal with in your own heart, or in your own soul. In those situations, one's behavior with others mattered less than pointing fingers at someone else who might be less enlightened and therefore more in need of being told how wrong and stupid they were. So, no matter what John Calvin said about the total depravity of all humankind, and about the undeserved grace of God, I grew up being encouraged to earn my place in heaven by being good and smart and obedient. Therefore, all the goodness I could do in the world would mean that what little forgiveness I "might" need was already granted, as God's gift freely given on the cross.

Perhaps some of this sounds familiar, but maybe not. Perhaps some of the lies you were taught about forgiveness were different but just as damaging. Forgiveness is so, so powerful. Therefore, forgiveness is such an easy tool to be manipulated. It has kept certain people in this country quietly thinking their upper hand on fairness was actually fair, maybe Godly even. So it's also why people like me are at such a loss for words as hatred and bigotry rears its ugly head now out in the open. We good church folks were taught over and over again to forgive extravagantly. In fact, we sometimes looked the other way as people like us piled injustice piled upon injustice and because it didn't directly affect us, and usually was to our benefit, it has been forgivable. And now we find ourselves asking what forgiveness should really look like when all the old patterns are deficient if not completely broken. Are we supposed to then forgive the haters who look like us?

That seems wrong on a multitude of levels. Are we supposed to ask the African American community, the indigenous community, the immigrants not of Western European descent for their forgiveness for wrongs that have been swept under the rug in Jesus' name for longer than many of us have been alive? Probably, but that seems like a paltry offering given our history. How will we begin to recognize the lies taught to us by and through our upbringings, and then really do the hard work of talking to our brothers and sisters about real forgiveness – yours, mine, and God's? My white, middle class, mainline Christian understanding of forgiveness hasn't always been helpful up to this point. But then again, taking another look, the Bible might be, and Jesus might be.

What Jesus is really saying about forgiveness might not be what I learned about forgiveness growing up. First off, let's take that 70 times 7 saying. What I learned this saying to mean was that I was supposed to be a doormat for Jesus, forgiving my friends and family who hurt me a million times over if I had to. Accountability wasn't the goal. Smoothing over the relationship to make it look nice was the goal. But I can do the math: 70 times 7 isn't a million, and for the Jewish audience Matthew was trying to reach, it didn't mean that anyway. The number 70 is a bit ambiguous as far as what it is supposed to designate – but sevens clearly have a purpose any time they show up. And the number seven that both Peter and Jesus use represents the completeness of creation, the seven-day story familiar from Genesis 1. To forgive someone seven times is to restore wholeness, to reset the creation, to begin truly anew with the person. It also matters that you couldn't buy someone's servitude for more than six years. In the seventh year, Hebrew slaves were supposed to be set free according to Mosaic law. And as the story that follows gives us an example of all debts being eradicated I have a hunch that we are supposed to be thinking about the Jubilee year here too. I have my rabbi friend Patrick to thank for those observations from his context – but 70 times 7 is not meant to imply infinite chances for the sinner who can't seem to correct his or her behavior, it is to imply restoration and a reset, the kind which requires transformation moving forward. But even this

extravagant forgiveness that Jesus is about to propose has its limits. For justice to truly be served – forgiveness has to be something more than unlimited chances to get it wrong in the community.

Now, I do assume that the illustration that follows is supposed to confirm what is being acknowledged with the 70 times 7 answer – but I find this parable frustrating – and ultimately about as dissatisfying as our own experiences of how to manage and understand forgiveness. Yes, it does speak to the tremendous power of forgiveness. The King, God perhaps, has all authority to even forgive the unpayable debt, and does so upon the slave’s groveling. One would think that the slave, the servant, would be overjoyed and completely transformed by the experience to extend the same mercy to others. But that’s not what happens at all. The slave extorts money from his fellow slave almost as soon as he gets the good news that his debt has been paid. Our “unfairness” mode should be kicking in at this point. “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” The answer to that is a resounding, “YEAH.” So in anger, the lord hands the slave over to be tortured until his entire debt is paid. Then Jesus says – God is like that too. God will punish you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from the heart.

In several of the stories about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s gospel, God is not above punishing those who don’t get with the program. If you cannot accept forgiveness and practice it, if you cannot recognize when your neighbor is hungry or thirsty and take care of them, if you aren’t grateful for your invitation to the wedding banquet, then too bad for you. God has other plans to throw parties for the down and out, and you won’t get to participate. The overturning Jesus is doing here gives hope to the hopeless, but it makes those in the seat of power a little bit twitchy.

I think, maybe, what Jesus could be saying by this parable is that even God’s best efforts may be unable to reach some people. God can offer to restore us to wholeness, to press the full reset button, and there will still be those who can’t or won’t be able to see that as an invitation to

offer grace to their neighbor. We won't be able to see that – unless we are able to see that. To truly right the wrongs in our communities is going to take grit and it's going to take work. Forgiveness doesn't come on the cheap. It's there from God ALL THE TIME, offered to the most difficult people, even the ones we don't want to let off the hook anytime soon. I don't think that my former custodian is out of the reach of God's love. I really don't. But I would gladly be the one standing in the church doorway telling him that he couldn't come in. What I do think is that Jesus is perfectly fine with us setting boundaries for behavior and understanding in the beloved community. It's OK to say when something isn't OK. It is OK to say to the Neo-Confederates who come to our city, your message isn't how we do things here, that heritage is symbolic of hate and won't be our best way forward. It is not our obligation to forgive the unforgivable. God will take care of it – in God's time. It is our responsibility to hold accountable, and to act with grace and love as best we can, in our own flawed, human, messed up kind of ways.

For my final word, I will borrow another fabulous insight from my friend Rabbi Patrick, who identifies himself with Punk Rock as much as he does his Judaism. He reminded me this week that what we do as prophetic leaning clergy and people of faith is always an act of benevolent futility. Jesus talks his head off about love and justice and forgiveness, just as every prophet before him was known to do. And none of it has worked. What I mean by that is that we are still dealing with the same old stuff. And we will keep dealing with people finding ways of being awful to each other – likely forever – because we are always dealing with messed up people here. But God NEEDS God's people to keep resounding the message – loud and clear – for those who will have ears to hear it – even if it doesn't work – most of the time. Love one another. Forgive your people when they mess up, but not by covering it up, by letting the knowledge of their wounding behavior change them, transform them, and allow them to be amazed by the fact that their blunder has been forgiven. Forgive often – but preferably in those ways that offer restoration to the community at

large. Speak of God's love as extravagantly as Jesus does in every single act of worship and study that you do. As Patrick reminded me, maybe that is the most prophetic kind of thing that we do is to gather and worship and give thanks to this God who loves us way too much to let us get away with being the kind of person who gets his life back and then extorts his neighbor for \$100. Benevolent futility. Yep. It's what we do. So keep sending that love out into the world – 70 times 7. Amen.