

Forgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story: A woman in his congregation comes to see him. She was a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She said to the rabbi, "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's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?" The rabbi answered her, "I'm 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 because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself."

Peter asked his question ([v. 21](#)) in response to Jesus' previous teaching about the process the church should follow in dealing with sinners ([vv. 15-20](#)). Jesus said when someone sins against you, go first to them one on one with humility, to solve the issue privately. If that does not work, take two or three with you to make sure you have expressed yourself correctly and have not misunderstood. If that does not work it is time to take the issue to the church for a decision to be made. Each step is for reconciliation. What two or three as the community of faith bind on earth will be bound in heaven and what two or three, as the community of faith looses on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Our scripture begins with Peter's famous question about forgiveness and Jesus' equally famous response. To his answer Jesus attached a rather straightforward

parable about forgiveness and judgment. Together these passages create a forceful call to forgiveness within the Christian community.

Peter's suggestion that he must forgive up to seven times was not an attempt to place a limit on forgiveness. In fact, since seven is a holy number, Peter was probably asking something like, "Must I practice perfect forgiveness?" To which Jesus responded, "Not seven times, but ... seventy-seven (or seventy times seven)" (v. 22). While the exact number is not clear in the Greek, the point of the number is. Your forgiveness must be beyond perfect; it must be beyond counting. Forgiveness becomes an absolute.

The parable Jesus gave places human forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness and divine punishment. The parable reads as a straightforward call for "us" to forgive one another because God forgives us and will punish us if we do not.

Jesus' story opens with the lord demanding repayment from a slave for an absurdly large amount of money. Ten thousand talents does not mean just ten thousand talents, since both "ten thousand" and "talent" serve in Greek as the largest possible number. It would be like one of us owing a trillion dollars to someone and only having our current income and resources. There would be no way to pay such an amount!

The lord responded severely to the expected inability of the slave to repay such a sum by not only selling all his property but also selling the slave, his wife, and his children. Such selling of debtors into slavery was prohibited in Jewish law, and although it was permitted in Greek and Roman law, it was almost never practiced. Thus this lord was a severe master. This makes his response to the slave's request for patience and the rather empty promise of repayment all the more surprising. However, the lord forgave the entire loan. This lord was excessive in both severity and mercy.

The forgiven slave was also excessive, at least in severity. He violently choked one of his fellow slaves, demanding repayment for a strikingly small amount of money, something like a few months worth of wages. Then, despite receiving the same plea he gave his lord, this slave threw his fellow slave into prison. Jesus is commanding us that forgiveness must be a mark of the Christian community (v. 35). The contrast in the amounts forgiven is like the contrast between what God forgives us and what we forgive each other. So forgiveness must engender forgiveness. The forgiven must forgive others. Given this absence of forgiveness, the lord rescinded his forgiveness and terrifyingly handed the slave over "to the torturers" (v. 34). In this passage God's forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness.

The most famous such moment occurs in the Lord's Prayer and in Matthew's comment upon it. The prayer petitions God to "forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us" (6:12). The conditional nature of God's forgiveness suggested here is highlighted by Matthew at the end of the prayer: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14-15). Christians, who live under God's grace and forgiveness, will be judged by this same God, mostly by whether we show the same grace and forgiveness to others. **Lewis R. Donelson**

Peter's question to Jesus, "How often should I forgive?" provides us with an opportunity to explore our own forgiveness as it speaks to our relationship with ourselves, with those we love, with those we hardly know or do not know, with God, with our enemies, and with our faith communities. Although Peter's question is directed toward others within the church, those with whom there is a bond through the Spirit of God, the area of forgiveness is one that weighs heavily upon

all people of faith in all areas of our lives as we seek to live in a way that is faithful to Jesus' life and teaching.

While all of the world's major religions teach about the necessity of forgiveness, it has been only recently that the medical and scientific world has also begun to delve into the importance of forgiveness for health and well-being. It is now widely known that unforgiveness, or holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply affects our emotional and physical health.

Jesus speaks to the necessity of forgiveness because he knows the effects unforgiveness has on individuals and communities. There are so many situations within our society, in the world, in our churches, in our families, and in our workplaces that, when not dealt with, can sow the seeds of bitterness and fester into deep, painful wounds.

Often we do not really want to forgive someone or ask for their forgiveness, even though we know we "should." One reason may be a desire for revenge. We may simply want to get back at someone for what was done to us. We may want to return the hurt by inverting the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as they have done unto you." We may resist forgiving another because we think that the person who hurt us ought to do or say something to mend the hurt, or repay us for what we have experienced. We want to put conditions on forgiveness. We may resist forgiving another because of our own pride or lack of real sense of how much God has forgiven us. The servant in the parable who was forgiven a huge debt but was unwilling to forgive a small one had no sense in his heart or mind of the generosity and graciousness shown to him.

Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person's actions or

attitudes in our lives, for example, when children who have been abused by parents can acknowledge what their parents did.

Forgiveness is also not a matter of putting other persons on probation, waiting for them to do something wrong so we can take it back. Forgiveness is not an excuse for unjust behavior, and to forgive is not necessarily to forget. Eleanor Roosevelt, after finding out about her husband's infidelity, said to him, "I can forgive but I can never forget." Some events and situations we should *not* forget: the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, exploitation of children and women, mistreatment of Native peoples, the infidelity of a spouse, a lie told that turned your life upside down, abuse, or betrayal. But you say the other person does not deserve forgiveness and mercy. True. There was a young man in Napoleon's army who committed a deed so terrible that it was worthy of death. The day before he was scheduled for the firing squad, the young man's mother went to Napoleon and pleaded for mercy for her son. Napoleon replied, "Woman, your son does not deserve mercy." "I know," she answered, "If he deserved it then it would not be mercy.

Who are you called to forgive? Is there someone who you have been angry with? Someone who hurt you so you want them to be hurt? Today, with the help of the Holy Spirit you can begin the process of forgiveness. I invite you to write the name of someone you need to forgive and place it in your Bible or purse or pocket and ask God to give you the courage to contact that person and forgive them. Why? Hear this story: One prisoner of war who asked another, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?"

"I will never do that," the second one answered.

"Then they still have you in prison, don't they?" the first one replied.

In closing, hear this story from church council records in sixteenth-century Switzerland. Asked to repeat the Lord's Prayer, a man pretended he did not know

it, because he knew that if he said it he would have to forgive the merchant who cheated him—and that was something he had no intention of doing! **Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn**

Jesus teaches us if we want to be forgiven, we must forgive others.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A,
Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).