

“Forgiveness”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

How many of you know this parable?

How does it make you feel by the end?

(it makes me feel a little uneasy and a lot guilty because I find it difficult to forgive)

The parable begins with a question by Peter; Lord how many times should I forgive someone in the church who sins against me?

And Peter suggests seven times would be generous, and it would.

But how do we quantify things like love and forgiveness?

If you're counting, you're in trouble.

There are some things that can't and shouldn't be counted, and what's needed is a whole new mindset or understanding, which often seems like Jesus' cue for a parable.

And note this is a parable – it's a story that works away at us – that causes us to think, and rethink – and there are few straight lines of meaning.

So the parable begins with two characters – the King who makes questionable decisions and a servant.

The servant owes his master a lot – a fortune – a sum beyond understanding – who would ever let someone owe so much?

Ten thousand talents is what this first servant owes.

One talent is what a labourer would earn in 15 years.

So if the servant gave the master everything he made, he would be paying the master back for the next 15,000 years.

How ridiculous it must have sounded to Jesus' hearers when the servant pleads; “I will pay you back every penny I owe.”

There is no chance he could pay him back in a thousand lifetimes, let alone the one he had.

So as the chuckling settles down – at this ridiculous plea, and Jesus pronounces the king's judgment – the least the king should do is sell him and all his family into slavery – at least the king will get something for this good for nothing servant, can you imagine the faces of everyone who hears that the king forgives the servant's debt completely?

What king would forgive so great a debt completely?

And as we contemplate this incredible turn in the story, Jesus continues the servant comes across a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii – a lot – three months' salary.

And we hear the same words of plea – I will pay you back everything I owe you – just have patience with me.

And we are all outraged as this servant shows no mercy.

He has been given so much forgiveness, and yet he shows none.

But in the end he gets what he deserves – he's thrown into prison and tortured until he repays it all –all fifteen thousand years worth.

And it seems like quite a satisfying end to the story until Jesus' last sentence "that is what my heavenly Father will do to you, unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

And suddenly most of us are squirming in our seats.

So first things first, this is a parable.

And things don't all line up like math equations.

First question we might ask ourselves – have we really been forgiven as much as the first servant?

How much has God forgiven us?

We have all been forgiven a debt that we could never repay in a thousand or even 15 thousand lifetimes.

Our sin is a debt we could never repay – there was no way for us to set things right between us and God.

And the Bible tells us that the penalty for our sin isn't prison, or selling our family into slavery, but is death.

Consider the words you have spoken, the promises not kept, the hurt caused, the mistakes made, the selfishness, greed, lust, and lying.

Those are the sins we commit, but what about the good we omit – when we could have helped but were too lazy, or too stingy, or fearful, or we didn't show compassion, we didn't care, we didn't do the good we know we should have done.

The old confession of sins is "we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things we ought to have done, and there is no health in us."

The debt we owe is as great as the servants.

And there is no hope, no help for us unless we are forgiven.

And here is one of the places where the parable is not the same as the gospel.

There is not an exact parallel.

In the gospel, God doesn't just wipe the slate clean of our sins.

God does forgive us yes – but it is done in and through Jesus' life and death for us.

So thinking about the parable a little more, we are like the first servant in that we have been forgiven a debt we could never hope to repay.

Are we unforgiving?

Do we treat others who have wronged or hurt us, with forgiveness, do we show mercy as we've been shown, or are we unmerciful, and unforgiving as the servant?

I leave you to contemplate that and the Holy Spirit of God to prompt and nudge you to consider those you have not forgiven.

But the most troubling part of this parable is Jesus' closing words about God's forgiveness being taken away if we don't forgive.

And we hear echoes of our Lord's prayer in this: forgive us our debts, or our trespasses, **as we forgive** our debtors, or those who trespass against us.

That line – "as we forgive" is troubling, because it puts our forgiveness by God in question. And suddenly we wonder if grace – our forgiveness is a gift – or if it is contingent on us- which would mean we are not saved by grace.

So, how do we understand this...

Martin Luther, founder of the reformation took it to mean that our unforgiveness doesn't cause God's unforgiveness, rather our unforgiveness makes visible that we really haven't accepted God's forgiveness.

Luther said; "The outward forgiveness that I show in my deeds is a sure sign that I have the forgiveness of sin in the sight of God."

In other words, "if I am united to Christ in faith, I'll have forgiveness and Christ will live in me, forgiving through me those who offend me as he has forgiven me. If, rather than being troubled by my inability to forgive, I don't want to forgive, there is a good chance that I haven't in fact received forgiveness from God, even if I believe I have." (Miroslav Volf Free of Charge p. 156)

I find that helps me a lot, because in the parable, I think, how can that first servant be so unforgiving just after he has been forgiven so much?

Do you know anyone who is focused so much on what is owed to them that they miss how much they have been given?

Parables are to work at us, and in us.

Forgiveness is hard to give and to receive.

But forgiveness is what sets us free and gives us a future together.

Forgiveness is the only hope for going forward as a community.

Punishment can be given out, repayment can be made, but without forgiveness the relationship can never be restored and there is no future.

Bitterness and darkness binds the unforgiving heart.

Guilt and pain binds an unforgiven heart.

Jesus came as light, and life, to set captives free.

The Holy Spirit of Jesus works in us what we cannot do ourselves so that we know that we are forgiven, so that we might seek forgiveness, and so that we might forgive, so we might have hope and a future together.

Today we gather at our Lord's table – in our homes- and we hear Jesus' words: This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

Here we remember the gift of God given to us – and as the love and grace of God fills our hearts, we let go of the hurt and to learn to forgive as we celebrate all that God has given to us.

Thanks be to God.