

Sunday, April 2, 2017 - Granting Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35 - Parable of the Forgiving Servant

Marysville United Methodist Church

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What's a great gift you've received? *Ask for answers*

- Set of knives from Costco from my brother
- Aaron got my family to chip in and give me a gift certificate for a massage each month

Today we're exploring a fascinating Jesus story, what to do when you get a great gift and a couple thoughts about forgiveness.

Jesus story

Much of Jesus' teaching in the Bible has to do with debt - it's pretty incredible. In Roman Palestine, debt was a very real, agonizing, often brutal reality. Forms were not mailed from the Roman Revenue Service, but strong men who could break your knees showed up and demanded payment. The unfairness of it all, the desperate craving for mercy, proved to be Jesus' best window into the hearts of his listeners when he was trying to talk about divine and human forgiveness (Feasting on the Word).

This parable is the most absurd debt collection imaginable. One man owes 10,000 talents - one talent was the largest denomination of money in the ancient world. 10,000 talents = 60 million days' wages - sixty million days? 165,000 years. This man owes the king more money than was actually in circulation in Judea at the time!

Jesus is trying to astonish his listeners with the immensity of the heart of God. How much can be forgiven? Not manageable, believable amounts of sin, but any, all, no matter how high the mountain, no matter how awful the infractions.

It's all quite absurd! Now the man who owes more than is humanly possible is given mercy and forgiveness. What does he do? "Hey! You owe me money. Pay up!"

Every Sunday, we pray Jesus' prayer - "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt 6:12)."

The man in Jesus' parable cannot pray this prayer for a single moment. Can we? (Feasting on the Word)

Imagine someone gives you a massive gift (large fridge box wrapped with a bow next to me)

- How do you feel?
- Now imagine, you receive it and instead of simply being thankful and allowing that grace to flow **through** you to others -- you now grasp for what everyone else owes you
- This is not okay. But many of us do this. I do this.
- While holding the big gift -- **This is what God gives us. Can we share it with someone who's hurt us?**

Here's the deal.

- We cannot repay God for the grace given to us.
- We simply bow at God's feet and humbly give thanks and praise and service to our God.
- And we look at the debts that people owe us - the ways they've hurt us - and we forgive.

Failure to forgive is not just bad form or something God frowns upon. Failure to forgive is failure to be like God. When we choose not to forgive, the flow of grace, forgiveness and love comes to us and then stops and doesn't flow through us.

Love is meant to flow through us and onto others. That's what love does.

Hubert Humphrey was a former vice-president of the United States. When he died hundreds of people from across the world attended his funeral. All were welcome, but one – former President Richard Nixon, who had not long previously dragged himself and his country through the humiliation and shame of Watergate. As eyes turned away and conversations ran dry around him Nixon could feel the ostracism being ladled out to him.

Then Jimmy Carter, the serving US President, walked into the room. Carter was from a different political party to Nixon and well known for his honesty and integrity. As he moved to his seat President Carter noticed Richard Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Richard Nixon, held out his hand, and smiling genuinely and broadly embraced Nixon and said "Welcome home, Mr President! Welcome home!"

The incident was reported by Newsweek magazine, which wrote: "If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion (The Workbook on Living as a Christian, Maxie Dunnam)."

We don't forgive others so *that* God will forgive us. We forgive others as our acceptance of God's forgiveness.

The question must be asked then - **Can we even forgive others if we're not in touch with how God has forgiven us?**

This is my story. As a recovering perfectionist, I'm hard on myself. Harder than anyone else ever could be. I'm slowly gaining more freedom in this part of me, but I often see how deep its reach goes in my soul. If I'm prosecutor, judge and defender all on my own, then I have sentenced myself for the mistakes I make. That causes me, in seasons, to be pretty sure I don't need God. I've already put myself in prison and I'm doing my time. And I will *earn* my way out with good behavior and doing the right things.

And God simply smiles and whispers, "you don't have to live this way. You don't have to live this way."

This is grace. I owe God 60 million day's wages for all God does in and for me but I so often turn the other way.

If I'm not aware and living in the daily reality that God has forgiven me, then it's tough for me to forgive people I love.

We continue to learn from Desmond Tutu on the deep value of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a choice.

We have a forgiveness muscle and it gets stronger over time as we repeatedly forgive the small things. Then the pattern is already in place when it comes to the big ones.

Raising children is like training for a forgiveness marathon. We forgive the infant for waking us at all hours of the night. We forgive a toddler tantrum because we understand they don't have the language yet to express their big feelings. As children grow, they find new and creative ways to test our patience, but we learned to forgive them over and over, and fold them back into our embrace. We've been able to forgive them because we have known their humanity.

We pray for our children. We want the best for them. We also pray for the people who annoy or hurt us. Desmond Tutu writes, "When my heart holds anger or resentment toward someone, I pray for that person's well-being. It is a powerful practice and has often opened the doorway to finding forgiveness. People have sometimes expressed shock that I prayed daily for the president of South Africa, even during the darkest days of apartheid, but how could I not? I was praying for him to rediscover his humanity, and thereby for our country to rediscover its shared humanity."

We choose forgiveness because it is how we find freedom and keep from remaining trapped in an endless loop of telling our stories and naming our hurts (Tutu).

But it's more than simply saying, "I forgive you." **It needs to actually take root in your heart.**

Saying "I forgive you" sounds simple but can be very hard to say and even harder to mean. Perhaps you believe you have already accepted what has happened and forgiven the person who harmed you. This is wonderful. In fairness, I must caution that many people, even very spiritual people, try to leap over their suffering in pursuit of their inner peace or they sense it's the right thing to do. The words of forgiveness are said, but the reality of forgiveness has not taken root in their hearts and lives.

"Darling, "I am so sorry. Do you forgive me?" says the contrite wife, walking in late from work and finding dinner cold out on the table. "Yes," her husband spits back through gritted teeth, seeing his hours of loving preparation wasted. Without allowing themselves to walk the path of forgiveness, the couple establishes a veneer of peace that's more of an uneasy truce than genuine forgiveness (Tutu).

How do you know when we grant forgiveness that we truly mean it?

There's no one size fits all for this. For some it feels as if a huge weight has been lifted. For others it is an overwhelming sense of peace. Often it can simply be that you know you have forgiven when you wish the other person well, and if you can't wish them well, you at least no longer wish them harm. There is freedom in forgiveness - and when you feel this new freedom - you'll know you have truly forgiven (Tutu).

Ben Bosinger had heard a million times that he should forgive his father. But he didn't really know what it meant to forgive. What would it feel like? What would it look like? His father was the angriest, most violent human he'd ever known. And Ben carried this trauma with him into every relationship for the next several decades.

"One day I drove up his driveway and he came outside and we talked about motorcycles. We both really like motorcycles. And in that instant, when we both were bent down looking at that greasy engine, side by side, I forgave him. I looked at his long gray hair, his wrinkled face, his obvious weakening from hard living and old age. He was human. He was so flawed. He loved motorcycles just like me, and somewhere in the middle of seeing all that, I simply forgave him. It was like this huge boulder was lifted off my chest and I could finally breathe again. He didn't ask me to forgive him. He wasn't sorry or remorseful. Still, I forgave.

We didn't skip off into the sunset together. In fact, years later I saw him again and he said something to me that felt hurtful and critical, and for a moment I wondered if the forgiveness had worn off.

Instead, I learned that I had an expectation that my forgiveness would magically turn him into a nice guy, a different guy, a better guy. And with this expectation I was making myself a victim to him all over again.

The magic didn't happen to him. The magic happened to me. I felt lighter. The world seemed a more hopeful place. I learned not to take things so personally, and I learned that I was the only one responsible for what kind of father I turned out to be to my children. I wasted decades of my life reliving the victimization I endured as a child. When I forgave my father, it all melted away. I was free. Forgiveness didn't save him or let him off the hook. It saved me (Tutu)."

We forgive because God first forgave us. Amen.

Transition to communion -- **Forgiveness allows us to tell a new story.**

- No longer just about the facts of what happened, or about the pain and hurt we've suffered.
- It's a story that recognizes our shared humanity.
- And shared humanity is what we celebrate at the table of God.
- We all have been harmed.
- We all harm.
- Grace is for all of us.

Like the bread and the wine - **we too are broken and poured out for a hurting world. God doesn't wait for the brokenness in us to be healed before God uses us to love others.** This is the beauty of the kingdom of God.