

Psalm 103:8-14
Matthew 18:21-35

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 17, 2023

The Unforgiving Servant

Introduction to the Psalm

The hymnlike Psalm 103 is a kind of theological catechism enumerating eight qualities and characteristics of God—such as merciful and gracious. Today our lesson focuses on God’s stance toward human sin. Listen to these words from Psalm 103:8-14...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we find the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus knows the importance of forgiveness in the Christian community. We have been forgiven much and are instructed to be likewise forgiving of others. Hear these words from Matthew 18:21-35...

Sermon

A sign in a church parking lot located in a busy downtown area read as follows: “We forgive those who trespass against us, but we also tow them.” Forgiveness is our topic this morning.

Our text represents the final paragraph in the fourth of five major discourses or teaching sections in Matthew. This fourth section focuses on the inner life of the new community. And each of the five sections ends in the same way: with a parable or vision of the last judgment.

So all these parables and visions of the last things are designed to underscore the urgency of present choices and the importance of the issues involved. They all declare that the teachings of Jesus are not concerned with peripheral matters, or with things that can be safely postponed, but with matters that are of vital importance and need attention *today*.

Again it is Peter who steps forward, foot in mouth. He correctly understands that Jesus has been exalting forgiveness as a heavenly, spiritual power, able to sustain the health and integrity of the new community in the midst of its old human frailty. But Peter still goes astray by trying to quantify: “How often shall my brother or sister sin against me, and I forgive?” A rabbinic tradition suggested three times. Which one is the last straw? Number four, five? In a generous gesture Simon Peter suggests possibly seven times.

Seven does seem to connote fullness or completeness in the Bible. But it does not begin to measure the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness. In answering, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven,” Jesus is saying that forgiveness does not keep score; it is not a commodity to be figured on a calculator. Forgiveness is unlimited. The life of the new community must be the opposite of the life of the old, governed as often as not by the figuring of Lamech. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, in what is referred to as Lamech’s “Song of Vengeance,” we read that Lamech bragged that when a young man merely struck him, he retaliated by killing that fellow. He took vengeance, he said, seventy-seven fold. (4:22-24)

Then Jesus offers a parable as a capstone for all he had declared in chapter 18. In the parable he uses images and numbers designed to shock us out of the habit of petty calculation, to expand our moral imaginations, to move us into new ways of thinking and acting.

The parable says that in the course of their duties as examiners, a king’s accountants discovered that a servant had embezzled “ten thousand talents,” or literally “a myriad of talents.” A “myriad” was the largest number in ancient Greek accounting, and talents were the heaviest unit of monetary value. One talent was worth 6,000 denarii. One talent was the sum for 15 years of common labor. Ten thousand talents represents more than the wages of a day laborer for 150,000 years. Jesus is saying that the servant had cheated the king out of more than you can imagine.

Well, upon learning of the swindle the king decided to sell the servant into slavery, together with his wife and children. He would seize all his property and place it up for auction. The proceeds would never cover the huge debt, but the king's honor would at least be upheld, the man would be punished, and other servants who might contemplate similar play would have fair warning.

But the servant begged for mercy, promising the king that if only given a little time, he would pay off the debt. Of course, he could never in a lifetime pay off such a debt. Nevertheless, the servant's plea touched the king's heart, and he had pity. Not only did he release him, but he also cancelled the entire monstrous debt.

Well, this same servant went out and right away encountered a fellow servant who happened to owe him one hundred denarii. One denarius was equal to one day's pay for a skilled laborer. Not exactly a negligible amount, and yet really nothing compared with the debt just forgiven him by the king. The first servant is now in the position of the king, and the second servant falls down and begs for mercy. And yet the first servant, so fully and graciously forgiven, refuses to forgive his fellow servant and puts him in prison, until his family or friends might be able to post the ransom necessary for his release.

Naturally, their fellow servants are outraged and report to the king what has occurred. Immediately the king summoned the first man, denounced him as a "wicked servant," and handed him over to the jailers until he should pay all his debt, which he could never do.

How many relationships have crumbled because of the refusal to forgive? Husbands and wives. Children and parents. Brothers and sisters. Partners in business. How many wars have been fought? How many churches have been split? Where forgiveness was deemed impossible.

There's the story of First Church: The new pastor at First Church had only been on the job for a week or two when he began to receive phone calls about past due church bills.

Alarmed, the pastor began to call a number of the main vendors and services to whom the church normally made payments and found that most of them were seriously in arrears. Some of the accounts were over a year past due.

It had been several years since the church had had an annual review of its financial records. When the audit team began to investigate, the sad facts started to emerge. James, the respected and well-liked treasurer, child of the church and member of the Session, was falsifying his monthly report to the Session to show that all the bills had been paid. In addition, it was clear that he had taken \$2,000 of the congregation's money to cover some of his own debts.

Shock and disbelief were the first feelings that members of the Session experienced. Then a full range of emotions began to exhibit themselves, including anger and the desire for vengeance .

Well, James met with the Session to apologize for what he had done and to ask for forgiveness. He told the Session that he was in therapy and was trying to deal with some serious emotional difficulties. Still, among the elders there was the desire to remove him from the church, turn him over to the authorities, and otherwise act out every kind of harsh consequence against him.

However, Frank, a member of the Session, speaking with tears in his eyes, insisted that they slow down and reflect on James's repentance and his request for forgiveness. Suddenly the elders were faced with another way of viewing their relationship with James. What if this were their opportunity to bring reconciliation and restoration to a situation of brokenness? They prayed for guidance, and for James, and for the congregation. And in the end they were led to

believe that there was no better time to practice being ambassadors of Christ's reconciling love and power than the present. The move from anger and vengeance to compassion and restoration was an experience of God's grace at work in First Church.

Subsequently, a plan was developed for James to repay the money he took and the fees of the accounting firm that was hired to figure out the fiscal problems. Members reached out to him and his family and pledged to walk with them as children of God in continuing need of God's renewal. By the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, James and the congregation of First Church would enjoy healthier days ahead—together.

And so it is that forgiveness brings life, whereas vengeance and hatred and spitefulness bring death. To live together well, we must find ways to release people from the strangleholds of anger, retribution, and isolation, however justified these claims may be. So that we can get on with life in a more constructive way. Simple as that sounds, we know it is not that simple.

For genuine forgiveness involves costly grace. Genuine forgiveness for real wrongs committed is painful and difficult. Finding the inner resources to let go the knot of rage, or pride, or shame, or humiliation requires a special spiritual gift.

Forgiveness requires a change within us that at some level comes about by something beyond our own powers. We in the church have tended to assume that forgiveness should occur automatically as a spontaneous expression of faith rather than as a certain sort of work and suffering and the action of God's grace. Thereby we heap more guilt upon people who wonder why they are having such a time forgiving. Our ability to forgive and to live in a spirit of forgiveness is ultimately a gift of God. The God who does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. (Ps. 103:10)

At the same time, it is not true that we can do nothing to realize or effect forgiveness ourselves. To participate in the process of peacemaking, transformation, and renewal is what forgiveness is essentially about. Strangely, it requires of us a deep letting-go and letting-be. True forgiveness is more like a surrender of will than an exercise of it—a willingness to let go of a claim. And letting go is sometimes harder than holding on.

No, forgiveness is not carelessness or indifference to wrong. It is not permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards. It is not assuming the attitude that anything goes. It is not allowing someone to abuse us time and time again.

Forgiveness is facilitated by acknowledging our own need for forgiveness in some broad and fundamental sense, recognizing our common humanity, our own part in the larger web of frailty and sin. “And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (Jn. 1:18)

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts. There we see the incredible kindness of God, who surprises people, not by dealing with them on the scale of justice, but by showing mercy. Our King of Kings forgives us a debt we could never repay—at a great cost, the cost of his only begotten Son. Our King calls and enables us to forgive others. This is a matter of vital importance. A matter of life and death. And so we rightly pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.