

Forgive Us Our Debts . . .

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque,
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Matthew 18:21-35

This morning's gospel reading begins with Peter asking a question of Jesus: "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" It seems to me that Peter is being pretty generous to suggest that he might forgive someone as many as seven times. How many of us would be willing to forgive someone seven times? It's hard enough to forgive someone once. But seven times? That's a lot of forgiveness!

Well, it may be a lot for us, but not for Jesus. How does Jesus respond to Peter? "Don't just forgive someone seven times, Peter. Forgive them seventy-seven times." Or as some translations render it: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven." (Now, when you decided to follow Jesus, you probably didn't realize there would be math involved! So, for those of you who don't have a calculator close at hand, $70 \times 7 = 490$ times!) Jesus is saying that forgiveness is meant to be infinite, limitless. Jesus is saying that we should always be willing to forgive. Forgiveness is not about keeping score. "Jordan, that's the third time I've had to forgive you this week!" No, followers of Jesus aren't supposed to be keeping score of one another's offenses -- unless of course they have no objection to God keeping score of theirs. (God keeping score of our offenses? For some of us that's a pretty scary thought!)

To illustrate his point about forgiveness, Jesus tells a story about a slave, or servant, who owed ten thousand talents to the king. A talent was the largest monetary unit -- equal to the cumulative wages of a day laborer over fifteen years. And ten thousand was the largest possible number. It is a translation of the Greek word *myrias*, from which we get the English word *myriad*. So when you hear "ten thousand talents," what is meant is an unimaginable amount of money -- the cumulative wages of a day laborer working for 150,000 years! It is an unpayable debt.

As there is no way the slave can pay the debt, the king is about to sell the slave along with his wife and children and all his possessions. But the servant falls to his knees before the king and pleads for mercy. And contrary to all expectations, the king has compassion for the servant, releasing him and forgiving his enormous debt.

Now you would think that this servant would be the happiest person alive. You would expect him to be jumping up and down for joy. You might imagine that he would have some empathy for others in similar situations. At the very least, you'd think he would show a little gratitude. But no. Apparently, the servant leaves the king without so much as a thank you.

And the next thing we know, that same servant goes to a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, grabs him by the throat, and demands that he pay what he owes. A hundred denarii was the equivalent of 100 days' wages -- not an insignificant amount, but trivial compared to the ten thousand talents the first servant had owed the king.

His fellow servant falls down before him and pleads with him, but his pleas fall on deaf ears. The first servant has him thrown into prison until the debt is paid. No compassion. No empathy. No mercy.

Now the other servants saw this and were greatly distressed, and went to the king to tell him what happened. The king summoned the servant and gave him a royal dressing down: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger, the king sends the servant away to be tortured.

Through the years, Jesus' parable has been interpreted as an allegory in which God is our king, and we are God's servants. We owe God an enormous debt that we can never repay. God has created this planet we call home. God has given us life. God has given us laws to abide by. God has come to us in Jesus Christ to guide us and save us. But we are only human. God created us good, but we are fallen creatures. God gave us free will, but we often use it to go our own way rather than follow God's will. Though we may be grateful, we can never thank God enough. Though we may try to abide by God's commandments, we don't always succeed. Though we may want to be like Jesus -- to be more Christ-like -- we always fall short. Like the servant in Jesus' parable, we owe God an unpayable debt. The good news is that God offers to forgive us our debts and expects us, in turn, to forgive the debts of others -- to "pay it forward," we might say. Indeed, we are able to forgive others, *because* God has first forgiven us.

When you forgive someone, you are choosing to let go of a past wrong which that person committed against you and to no longer be hurt by it. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself. When you have been wronged by someone, you may be filled with hurt, anger, hate, a desire for revenge. You hold a grudge. It eats away inside you. By forgiving the wrongdoer, you free yourself from all those negative feelings that have been pent up inside you long after the incident has passed. Harboring enmity and seeking revenge can do far more damage to you than to the person who hurt you. Indeed, if you are unable to forgive another, you may very well find yourself tortured by the hurt, anger, and rage you keep bottled up inside.

Forgiveness is also something you do for the wrongdoer. It does not mean condoning or accepting the behavior of the wrongdoer, nor does it mean releasing the person from the consequences of his or her actions. But forgiveness does involve freeing the wrongdoer from the burden of your enmity, leaving him or her to answer to God.

Forgiveness is often confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness is unilateral, whereas reconciliation must be mutual. You can forgive someone whether or not they have expressed regret or shown remorse for what they have done. You can forgive someone regardless of whether they have asked for forgiveness. You can forgive someone even if they don't know you have something against them. Forgiveness is a unilateral act. It does not require anything from the wrongdoer.

By contrast, reconciliation must involve both estranged parties. Not only must the wronged party be willing to forgive, the wrongdoer must regret his or her actions, show remorse, and ask to be forgiven. Both parties must want their relationship to be restored for there to be any possibility of reconciliation.

When we have wronged someone, most of us are tormented by guilt and regret. By asking for forgiveness, we are desperately seeking to be freed from those feelings. We want the relationship to be restored. Reconciliation requires that both parties participate in the healing of the broken relationship.

It is often said that we should forgive and forget. But forgiving does not mean forgetting. Practically speaking, no one can consciously forget something, even if they wanted to. Besides, remembering is important. It's important to remember how we have hurt others, lest we pretend that we are better than we are. And it's important to remember how others have hurt us, so that we can try to protect ourselves from being hurt again.

There is no question that forgiving someone can be a difficult thing to do. But then, it all depends on your perspective.

Keith Meerholz worked in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. On the morning of September 11, he was in an express elevator traveling up to his 100th floor office when the first plane hit. It was 8:45 a.m., and the plane had hit the North Tower between the 94th and 98th floors, just below Keith's office. Keith's wife, Grete, watched the news in horror. Was Keith OK? Had he already reached his office? How would he even get out of the building with the floors below him engulfed in flames? Later that morning, when the North Tower fell, Grete was grief stricken. Her husband was in that building. She feared the worst. Moments later, she received a phone call. It was Keith. He had some burns, but he had made it out of the building alive -- just before it collapsed.

In an interview with NPR, Keith asked Grete how the experience had changed her. Grete said: "When I get mad at you, I think back to 9/11, and I can forgive you for anything." Yes, forgiveness can be difficult. But then, it all depends on your perspective.

On Friday, our nation marked the 19th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. There is no question in my mind that those attacks were sinful, evil acts and must be condemned unequivocally. At the same time, the anniversary begs the question: Can we ever forgive the terrorists who committed the 9/11 atrocities? Most Americans would say, "No. What they did is unforgivable." But what do we say as Christians? What do we say as followers of Jesus Christ, who forgave even those who nailed him to the cross, and who taught us to pray: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?"

Indeed, what happens to us if we don't forgive them? What does it do to us as a nation to hang on to enmity, rage, anger, and hate? Who or what do we become, if we don't forgive? I wonder.