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“Forgiveness Unlimited”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas

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Matthew 18: 21-35

Life’s not fair. Never has been. Never will be. But boy don’t we want it to be. We want fairness in our own lives and in the world. We strive for justice. We work for equality. We want life and the world to be balanced. I am reminded of the image of Lady Justice, who holds in her hands a scale. Her job is to keep those scales balanced so that one side isn’t weighed down too heavily and the other side isn’t too light. Life would be utter chaos without that balance.

It makes sense then that when we are wronged by another we would want to even out the score, to provide some balance by making the one who has wronged us pay. Otherwise things remain out of whack and that’s just wrong. So “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” kind of justice makes sense to many. Only, did you know that most people completely misuse that quote in order to justify avenging a wrong, something that was *not* allowed in Jewish law. When a wrong was committed, reparations were required. The “eye for an eye” quote really means that if someone

injures another person the reparation they must make, in *material* terms, cannot be more or less than is fair. But much of the world uses this quote from Exodus to justify vengeful killing, violence and destruction. Ghandi knew where that would end up though, “An eye for an eye” he said, referring to the popular misunderstanding of this passage, “leaves the whole world blind.” Or in the case of war, “a life for a life leaves the whole world dead.”

Vengeance doesn't bring peace. We know this as terrorists continue to bomb those they consider their enemies. We know this as Israel and Palestine continue to be at war with one another. We know this as gangs take revenge on rival gangs and teenagers end up dead. We know this as family disputes fueled by vengeful anger end up with someone dead. Jesus knows it best of all, and Matthew's gospel seeks to make Jesus' radical message of peace and forgiveness clear.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful . . .”

The world says, “No mercy!” “If you show mercy, you are weak.”

Jesus says, “When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer your left.”

The world says “Hit 'em again, hit 'em again, harder, harder!”

Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

The world says, “Softies never get ahead. If you have been wronged, you deserve revenge.”

Two radically different messages. Which one will we choose?

In today’s passage Peter is well-aware of Jesus’ call for forgiveness. He’s been with Jesus long enough to know that forgiveness is his mantra. After all, Jesus eats with sinners and forgives people all the time. But Peter also knows that there are occasions when forgiveness is tough – especially if one person must be forgiven repeatedly. Surely there is a limit – a number of times that you can forgive a person that proves “well, hey, I’ve done my part” and gets the forgiver off the hook.

The interesting thing is that Peter includes in his question a high number of times (seven) that he would offer forgiveness. Consider how generous that is already. Someone wrongs you. You are hurt and saddened, but you put it behind you and you forgive them. They do it again. You are hurt and saddened again, a little more this time because it has happened twice, but you put it behind you and you forgive them. They do the same thing again. And again, and again and again. Even Peter’s seven times of forgiving seems almost impossible for us human types. After all, Barbara Taylor writes:

Human nature does not work that way. Most of us are willing to get burned once, a lot of us even twice, but the third time we tend to back off. It is as if we

have little calculators in our heads, keeping track of how much we are putting into our relationships versus how much we are getting out of them, and not many of us pursue those with a negative balance.¹

So Peter says, “Come on Jesus, isn’t seven times enough?”

Jesus is teaching Peter, through his life, and soon through his death and resurrection, what it means to follow him, what it means to live as a child of God. Jesus knows that forgiveness is a part of living in relationship with God and with one another. So Jesus tells Peter to forgive seventy-seven times. New Testament scholar Douglas Hare points out that this number is possibly a reference to the fourth chapter of Genesis where Lamech (a descendant of Adam and Eve’s son Cain) “proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold on anyone who dares to attack him.”² For Jesus to use this number is to call upon a change in that quest for vengeance as threatened by Lamech. Jesus presents forgiveness as the “antonym of revenge.”³ Peter is called to be Lamech’s “polar opposite.”⁴

To help Peter understand why we are called to forgive “seventy times seven,” Jesus tells another parable.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 93.2

² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, The Interpretation Series, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 216.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

In this parable Jesus tells of a king who wants to settle accounts with those who work for him. As he sets about to do this, a servant-man is brought to him who owes him a ridiculously high sum of money - ten thousand talents. Ten thousand. Understand that a low-wage servant would earn a single talent in about fifteen years of working.⁵ Tom Long compares this to a lowly mailroom clerk owing IBM or Microsoft a bazillion dollars!⁶ Restitution is *not* possible!

To make the scale a little more balanced, the king orders that the man, his wife and children, and his possessions be sold to pay off part of their debt. The indebted man falls to his knees, begs for mercy, and promises that he will repay everything. This line would have brought a laugh from Jesus' listeners, for they knew how impossible that promise would be to keep, and they knew the king knew it, too. But the king caves, has pity on him, and up and forgives the man his whole debt. This is UNBELIEVABLE! The man is free. He owes nothing. Absolutely unbelievable.

But you haven't really seen unbelievable until you see what happens next in Jesus' story. That debt-free man runs out of the castle, not believing his good fortune, or the King's gullibility, and practically trips over a man who owes him 100 denarii, which is about three months' worth of a day-laborer's wages. He seizes him by the throat and demands his money. The man can't pay, so he too begs for mercy. But the

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 211. Also confirmed in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible Study Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc.: 2001), 35 (NT).

⁶ *Ibid.*

debt-free man has no mercy and in his arrogance, throws his fellow slave into prison until he could pay his debt.

As I am sure you can imagine, everyone listening to this parable is utterly disgusted by now. How preposterous that such a travesty should take place! Unbelievable that a man forgiven so much would *even consider* not forgiving so little.

So we should not be surprised that when the other servants hear about this, they are horrified and immediately tattle to the king. The king must have been infuriated and, in an act of outrage and disgust, he throws the man in jail for life. Matthew has Jesus end the story by saying that the same will happen to those who don't forgive their brothers and sisters from their hearts.

But here's the thing. I have a problem with this ending. It is not consistent with gospel Jesus presents to us overall. I agree with Barbara Taylor when she argues that the ending makes it seem like we are to "Do unto others or the king will do unto us." But the real message of the parable is that we are to do unto others because we know what God *has done* unto us. We forgive others not because we are afraid of punishment. Rather we forgive others because we understand the full extent to which we have already been forgiven.

Taylor writes,

If I am able to forgive at all, it is because I have been forgiven, because thanks to someone else, I know how it feels to have my debts cancelled, my credit restored, my relationship renewed. When it has happened to me, it's like someone has taken a big pink eraser and scrubbed my record clean, or better yet, has retired the ledger with my name on it and refused to keep score anymore. It is an incredible experience, but it is never one of my own doing. All I have ever been able to do is ask for it – to ask for forgiveness – but when it has been granted it has come to me from outside myself, a free gift from someone whom I have hurt, whom I have owed, but who has decided that what is more important than getting even is to remain in relationship with me. That is, as best I can say it, what real forgiveness is all about: pure, unadulterated grace.⁷

I have no idea how, but somehow the forgiven servant didn't get it. He didn't fully understand what had happened to him and what the king had done for him. If he *had* gotten it, there's no way he would have *not* forgiven his fellow servant. No way at all.

So if you ask me, this parable is about whether we get it or not – whether we get what God has done for us – how God has forgiven us such a tremendous debt as could never be repaid. 'Cause if we get it, even seventy-times seven isn't too many times to forgive someone else. If we get it . . .

⁷ Taylor, 95.

Some of you may have read the powerful writings of Corrie Ten Boom, who suffered in a concentration camp in World War II. During her time in a concentration camp she struggled mightily with her feelings against her captors, but after her release she put her energy into helping herself and those affected by the atrocities of the war to practice forgiveness. She travelled all around Europe preaching a message of forgiveness. She even preached in Germany. One Sunday in Munich, she found a crowd there eager to be forgiven.

After the service was over, a man walked up to Corrie and extended his hand. "Ja, Fraulein Ten Boom," he said, "I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all our sin, just as you say." Corrie recognized the man. He was one of the guards who had looked on, contemptuous and leering, when the women in her camp were forced to take showers. Corrie remembered. And as the man reached out his hand, expecting her to take it, her own hand froze at her side.

Corrie was stunned by her own response. What could she do, she who had thought that she had overcome the hurt and hate inside her, she who had preached forgiveness to others. What could she do now that she was confronted by a person she could not forgive?

She prayed: “Jesus, I can’t forgive this man. Forgive me.” At once, in a wonderful way that she was not prepared for, she felt forgiven. Forgiven for not forgiving. At that moment, her hand went up, took the hand of her enemy, and released him. In her heart, she freed him from his terrible past. And she freed herself from hers.⁸

She got it, you see. She really got it.

You see, seventy times seven is not that much really, when we realize God’s grace to us – when we realize that it is in such forgiveness that we are truly set free.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

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⁸ James, 4.