

Matthew 18:15-35 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my God in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So our heavenly Lord will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

And then Jesus told them a parable about the kingdom of God. A king was settling up debts, he was cleaning up his books. He started with those who owed the most, one was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. A talent being the highest monetary measure of the time - it is reported that King Herod made around 90 talents a year. So 10,000 talents, we are talking Jeff Bezos kind of money here. An amount that can never be repaid.

As the servant cannot pay the debt, the king orders him and his family sold. But the slave falls to his knees, begs and pleads - be patient and merciful and I will pay you everything. Which all know is not possible, this slave could work 80 hours a week for 75,000 years and still not pay off what he owes. And yet, the king is moved by the plight and has pity on the slave. The debt is forgiven. The man can go free.

And then this same slave, just after being forgiven runs into one who owes him 100 denarii. He grabs the man who owes him the 100 by the throat and demands payment. While 100 denarii is not Jeff Bezos money, it is also not nothing. One "denarii" is the amount of money made from a day of working in the field. So the debt owed to here is 100 days worth of hard back-breaking labor.

The scene repeats itself - the debtor falls to his knees and asks for patience and mercy. This time it is not granted. And of course we are to think, surely the forgiveness and grace received by this slave will be passed on. This is what we are supposed to think as we hear the parable, but we don't, because we have heard it too many times so we already know what happens. The slave that was shown mercy is *unable* to offer that same mercy to another.

On the surface the slave looks terrible, how could one who has been given so much give so little in return - how could one who has received so much grace be so ungracious?

Well, because forgiveness is not easy. Forgiveness can be complicated.

Let's imagine ourselves a bit deeper into this parable, what might make this slave be unwilling or unable to pass down the forgiveness offered to him?

- 1) Perhaps the whole experience with the king did not leave this slave feeling grateful and thankful, but embarrassed. Even as he has been forgiven, this whole ordeal has made him feel embarrassed, powerless, weak. He was summoned from his work and called on the carpet - he had to beg and plead to keep his family together. It is not hard to see how such an experience would have made him feel utterly powerless over his own situation. So he responds not out of gratefulness, but out of his wound, out of his sense of powerlessness. And so when he comes upon someone who now owes him money, he reacts out of his embarrassment - he reacts in a manner to try and make him feel like a man again.
- 2) Or, perhaps there is more to the story. Maybe this is 3rd or 4th time he has lent this particular slave money and it has not been repaid. Perhaps he has already made it clear, this is the last time, if you don't repay me this time, I will have you sent to prison. We all have to have some limits, otherwise, how will this slave learn. If I keep forgiving these debts, he'll never take responsibility for his own actions. And we do have to have limits. Someone was telling me about their pastoral care class in seminary, that they were instructed by their professor to of course be loving and gracious, but to also have limits

and boundaries. One limit this professor told his students was, you can bail a member of your congregation out of jail once, but never more than once. I'm not sure my feelings on the bit of pastoral care instruction, but it certainly illustrates that, at some point we have to make a relational change for ourselves.

- 3) Perhaps there is envy and jealousy at work between these slaves. It may be that the unforgiving slave is envious of the one who owes him money. I think my worst judgment comes out at someone when I am actually jealous of them in some way - jealous of their skill, the way something seems so easy for them, jealous of their Christian fame. You probably know this already but some of us pastors are a fragile-egoed bunch. At almost all gatherings of pastors, the first things that get asked are things like: how big is your congregation; how long have you been pastor; has your church been growing? All these sorts of measuring up questions. I see some of my greatest judgment come out at speakers at Mennonite gatherings and conventions - probably that is because there is a part of me that is simply jealous - why was this person asked to speak, they're not that good?!

So it may be that the slave who owed the 100 denarii is the king's favorite, or the most skilled laborer or the most attractive, and the deep and unexamined jealousy of the other slave takes over and causes him to be his worst self - causes him to refuse forgiveness because of his own envy.

- 4) Finally, perhaps he just couldn't believe in his own forgiveness. He believes that no king is so gracious and kind - he believes he still must try to repay, he must show the king he is trying to make good before the king changes his mind. So, if I can get this 100 denarii to take to the king, maybe it will continue to keep him at bay for awhile.

Sometimes in the church we make it seem like forgiveness is so easy and simple. But its not. Where true hurt and pain has been felt; where hard and deep breaks have happened in relationships, forgiveness is not easy or simple.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke at an Interfaith gathering on peace. One of other people who spoke was rabbi Dan Fink, and the words that rabbi Fink started with were these, “In my understanding of Judaism, peace is complicated.” So to borrow a phrase from rabbi Dan, *forgiveness is complicated*. Forgiveness is not easy. It is not simple. It is often not even a feeling - not something we feel we want to do or offer. And sometimes in the church, especially in a peace church, we can gloss over that.

When we were in Iraqi Kurdistan we toured a memorial museum in Halabja - it is a memorial about and dedicated to when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons on the Kurdish people of Halabja. 5,000 died that day. At least twice that many injured. Thousands more died later from complications and cancer. And in the very last room of that memorial was a display case with an official document, a pen, and a piece of rope. The paper was the death warrant of [Ali Hassan al-Majid](#), the cousin of Saddam who gave the order for the attack. The pen was the pen that signed it; the rope used in his hanging. I see that display and learn what it is and my heart sinks. Why does this memorial have to contain these signs of vengeance? Because this is not my story to tell; because forgiveness is complicated and messy.

In the church, we hold up forgiveness as a high ideal. As followers of Jesus we call each other back to this passage time and time again, 77 times we are to forgive (or 70 times 7,

depending on your translation). As a community of faith we try to form ourselves in this value, and so we tell powerful stories of forgiveness: stories of mothers forgiving their children's killers; of Father Jaque in Syrian forgiving his ISIS captors who destroyed his home and killed his friends; of 15th century Anabaptists speaking forgiveness as they're being burned at the stake; of Jesus on the cross saying, "Abba, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." This is who we want to be as a community of Christ, molding ourselves around these stories.

What we say of the kingdom of God is that it is here already among us, and it is not fully present, the kingdom is here *and* it is not fully realized. And so these stories are glimmers of God's Kingdom come now. Already. This is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's prayer. This is what we are working for together as the church. AND, the kingdom is not fully here, and so we also have stories of Halabja, stories of death warrants and executions, stories of our own broken families.

Just last week when I was in Indiana for continuing education, there was one of my professors who I had a hard time with - more than once he yelled at me in class. And for a few other reasons I don't need to get into, when I saw him I felt within myself that I still had some hard feelings toward him. So, I was just going to avoid him. There was enough people at the conference that I thought I could do that. And then during the last worship service I was walking down the aisle to get my body and blood. And he was walking back to his seat. And as we

passed he just wrapped me up in a big hug. And I thought to myself, Damn him. I just wanted to avoid him and hold onto my bitterness.

Forgiveness, says Gayle Gerber Koontz, is not neat and orderly, nor is it fully within our control. It may be more accurate and helpful to speak of forgiving as an ongoing process and attitude rather than a list of steps that happen and then are completed once and for all.” Perhaps there are times when it might be more accurate to say, I am trying to forgive, or I am in the process of forgiving.

And forgiveness will often not look as we had hoped or imagined. Forgiveness might mean reconciliation and a restoration of relationship, and it might not. While forgiveness can remove some of the barriers to reconciliation, it is no guarantee that reconciliation will come. Sometimes forgiveness may happen without any reconciliation and restoration.

I have one aunt who is largely estranged from the family. It is amazing how often the rest of the extended family can be together and we can forget that there is actually a whole branch of the family tree missing. But there is, my aunt Kay. And this week, after getting word that my Grandma is in her final months, my aunt Kay made the long trek back to Indiana to see her mom and say good-bye.

And there is this longing from me for them to be able to name the hurts they have caused each other in the past - to both acknowledge where they have hurt the other - for them to lay it all out there and then to say they are sorry for their mutual hurt. To seek and offer forgiveness to one another. But they didn't. I don't think they can. Even in this moment when they know this

is the last chance, for whatever reasons, they couldn't. No matter how badly I wanted it, it is not my story to tell.

Maybe sometimes the closest we get to reconciliation is sitting together in the living room agreeing that we won't talk about the past. That we can't talk about the past. Maybe the best we get sometimes is sitting together, watching the birds, and hugging as we part. Maybe that is forgiveness, even if it isn't the picture of full restoration that I have painted in my head. Because forgiveness is complicated.

Forgiveness is what Jesus calls us to. What Jesus teaches us. What Jesus has exemplified to us. What Jesus has done for us. And it is hard. It is messy. It is complicated. Like all of our life of faith, forgiveness is a continual journey. May we keep walking this journey together. Amen.