

16 Pentecost
September 17, 2023

Sermon by Deacon Steve Seibert

Previously on our series 'Life on the Shore of the Sea of Galilee: The Sacred Community of Jesus':

Amen I say to you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And so, whoever becomes humble as this little child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

If your brother does something wrong, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens, you have won back your brother.

Peter has been paying attention to these words of Jesus about living in community. Peter gets it that the community Jesus is speaking has a different set of guidelines from society in general. Peter feels the call of living in that community of which Jesus speaks. Perhaps he is trying to show Jesus just how much he is growing spiritually. He offers to forgive seven times. His question is "As often as seven times?" We can sense that he is expecting Jesus to say, "No, not seven, but at least three and maybe four times."

What do you think about Peter's offer? I'm thinking forgiving someone seven times ain't bad. And of course it depends how that member of the church is sinning against me. Are we talking about leaving the cap off the toothpaste, using my car but never putting any gas in it or are we talking about spreading malicious rumors about me that will cause me to lose face in society. I'm thinking seven times forgiving that kind of behavior is not too bad on my part. What do you think?

Jesus blows my and Peter's number out of the water. **Seventy-seven times**. Or possibly, that phrase translates **seven times seventy times**. In other words, Jesus is saying, don't track how many times we forgive. Just don't. Instead, continue to forgive your offending brother or sister.

Let's unpack the parable that Jesus now tells. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven **may be compared to a king**. He is saying there are some similarities between the two. They are not the same. Stanley Saunders writes, "Parables do not usually convey a single moral point so much as they induce critical reflection and pull the blinders from our eyes." So let's see how that king might be like God – and how he may not. The first slave is brought to the king, one who owes him 10,000 talents. Can we be clear, this debt is not a surprise to either king or slave. They both know about it. What catches the slave off guard is the immediacy of payment that is demanded.

10,000 talents. What does that number mean to us? \$10,000? Let's move that decimal point a couple of places - \$1,000,000? Yeah, NO. More than one source placed the amount in current dollars as about \$3,840,000,000. My sister-in-law might say DANG! For a minimum wage worker living in Jesus' time, it would take 60 million work days. 10,000 talents represents an impossible debt to pay. The selling of the slave, his family and possessions would hardly make a dent in 10,000 talents. The king forgives the debt completely. Not only is the debt forgiven; the slave's family remains intact. The king's mercy is beyond belief.

The slave, as he comes out, comes across one who owes him a hundred denarii. The amount is not insignificant. Somewhere between \$5000 and \$6000- or 4-months wages for a minimum wage worker in first century Palestine. This is a true debt, and in the economy of the world, the first slave has every right to collect it. What's the problem here? This parable is about God's economy. Mercy shown to me needs to beget my showing mercy to others.

Peter has listened to Jesus as he told this parable. He sits quietly for a few minutes, working to process this story. A slight smile came across his face.

"Jesus, remember when we asked you how we should pray, you taught us that prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil.**

That part where we ask God to forgive our debts AS WE HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS. Is that what you are talking about right now, with these two slaves?

Now the smile is on the face of Jesus. **"Good so far, Peter. Can you carry this thought any further?"**

"Well," said Peter, "The forgiveness God gives us only happens if we have forgiven others. That's why that forgiving seven times isn't enough, because I fall short of the mark all the time, sometimes seven times in a week, sometimes seven times in a DAY!"

"Yes, Peter", said Jesus. "That's why it's far better not to track how many times we forgive others. I want you to know, Peter, that letting go of the counting isn't easy. It is a journey, a journey that leads to a much more joyful life."

What about the king is this parable being like God? Forgiving an unpayable debt? How about God sending Jesus as the sacrifice for our bad behavior, mine and yours? So we check yes, definitely God-like. What about reinstating that debt because of the slave's selfish behavior. Let's add torture. Here is where the allegory breaks down. Definitely not God-like behavior. Let me be clear. There is in our future a time of judgement. We need not fear God for this is when all of creation will be restored, made right, made whole. But God is not in the business of "unforgiving" sins that have been forgiven. Even with our bad behavior.

Erica Lloyd, of the Seekers Church, says most of the figures in Jesus' parables are complex, forcing us to wrestle with the implications for us. The prodigal son, his brother, the shrewd manager, the unjust judge. But the unforgiving debtor...no one ever speaks up for him because he's a jerk and a hypocrite.

The problem is, she says, is that she gets it. He had nearly lost everything, including his very freedom, over a debt. Never again he says as he goes about making sure he can protect himself against future debts. He acts from his terror and pain. My brother Jeff once told me that much of the conflict in the world comes from people who act out of a sense of scarcity: not enough money, not enough power or control, not enough land, not enough sex.

The slave certainly seems to have acted from a sense of scarcity. He has, in effect, just been given 10,000 talents. And yet it is not enough for him. It feels as though the grace of forgiveness has had no effect on him.

In the 1960's, Rosamond Herklots was working in her nephew's garden in England when she realized that weeds and their roots were crowding out the flowers in the garden. New life was being prevented from taking root. It's not so much God not forgiving us; carrying unforgiveness takes up the space where forgiveness comes to us. This realization led to her composing this hymn.

**Forgive our sins as we forgive, You taught us Lord to pray
But you alone can grant us grace, To live the words we say**

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**How can your pardon reach and bless, The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs and will not let Old bitterness depart**

**In blazing light your cross reveals The truth we dimly knew:
What trivial debts are owed to us How great our debt to you**

**Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls, And bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love Our lives will spread your peace.**

Archbishop Desmond Tutu served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He spoke of a Black woman who asked him, "Who murdered my husband?" Tutu responded, "We do not know." She was insistent, however, and continued, "I must know who killed my husband." Tutu gently told her, "I'm sorry, we may never know who killed your husband." Still, her question persisted. Finally, Tutu asked, "My dear lady, why must you know who killed your husband?" She responded simply and quietly, "So I can forgive him."

Amen.