

The Unforgiving Servant
Matthew 18:21-35
24 July 2022 Clarence Presbyterian Church
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We are heading down the homestretch of our year long series on the essential stories from the bible. These are the stories that inform our faith and shape our life in community. Recently, we've been reflecting on a series of important parables. Today we heard the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Next week we conclude with the Prodigal Son.

Jesus used parables as one of his teaching tools. Often they include exaggeration or hyperbole. Sometimes the disciples misunderstand, and Jesus must interpret for them. Sometimes parables startle us and reveal a more excellent way to live, a way peculiar to his followers.

This is in the case of the Unforgiving Servant. The message is clear. We are to forgive others as we are forgiven. In other traditions, there's no need to forgive until and unless the transgressor repents. Christians believe that God releases us from our debts, however egregious they may be. Therefore we are to forgive others whether there's penance or not.

Let us look more closely at the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. There are three acts.

Act I. There is an apparently severe master who wants to settle his accounts. He calls one of his servants in for the reckoning. His debt is 10 talents which interpreters tell us is the equivalent to 150 years of income – an impossibly huge debt. If the servant is unable to pay, he and his family and his property will be sold. Of course, he cannot pay, so he falls on his knees and begs his master – be patient with me and I'll pay it back. This is an absurd request because the debt can never be repaid. And yet, the master forgives the entire loan down to the last penny. A magnanimous and merciful gesture.

Act II. We aren't given specifics, but it seems that the servant hops to his feet and strolls out the door liberated and debt-free. Just outside, he encounters a fellow servant who owes him about 4 months of income – rather microscopic in the scheme of things. Without a beat, he grabs his debtor and chokes him - demanding that he pay. The fellow servant falls on his knees and begs for patience. I will repay you, he says.

You'd think the servant would recognize himself. After all it's been just minutes since he was on his knees. So wouldn't you think he'd... But no, he has the man thrown in prison until he can pay up.

Act III. This behavior has not gone unnoticed. Fellow servants witness the assault and are outraged. As a group, they march back to the master and report what they've seen.

He shares their outrage, calls the wicked servant to account. You've mocked my generosity, he says. Off you go to be tortured until you pay the entire debt – which is forever. The point is clear: The extravagant mercy we've been given is to be passed along. As we know, it's not always easy and the following story may trouble you.

Recently in an online Centering Prayer group, a Canadian friend shared this. She is on faculty at a public research university in Toronto. Specifically, she teaches a Master's level course called Business Ethics and Accountability. A few weeks ago, her students submitted their final papers for class. Upon grading, she became concerned about possible plagiarism from 2 of her international students.

She described to us how she has access to a program entitled Turnitin that scans student papers. It highlights any texts that match wording from its database. It's a huge database which includes online journals, web articles, and previously submitted papers. She scanned the two papers, and the program spit out the results. 78% of one student's paper was highlighted; 86% of the other student's was also highlighted. In other words, they each had lifted more than 75% of their papers from online sources without crediting them. This, of course, is plagiarism, a serious academic offense, especially for graduate students, and especially for this class called Business Ethics and Accountability, whose building blocks are Honesty, Integrity, and Fairness.

She called the students into her office, showed them their highlighted papers. She told them that she would have to fail them. You may be sad to learn that they denied plagiarizing, even with the evidence right in front of them. Instead, they asked her to please pass them. She says she felt her heart harden when they wouldn't acknowledge their wrong doing. They begged her. She argued that it wouldn't be fair to the other students and Fairness is one of the tenets of the class. She then sent them on their way. I certainly would have done exactly the same. Honest is honest; fair is fair; integrity is integrity. There's no room for cheating.

But before she could record their failing grade, she said she felt a nudge from God. She was reminded, and I quote, "of how much God forgives me on a daily and hourly basis when I'm not even aware that I've done wrong. God's grace is unwarranted and underserved by me. And yet God pours out his mercy." She sensed she was being asked: *Shouldn't you return the same mercy?* Her heart softened which is where Jesus says forgiveness begins. She began to feel compassion for her young students – so very far from home and eager to return.

She contacted her colleagues. What did they think? How could she not have empathy? How could she not forgive this offense when she has been so graciously forgiven? They discussed it at length. Finally they agreed that she should contact the Director of the Program, who permitted her to send a letter to the students. The letter announced that they had in fact, passed her course.

This decision may trouble us. But the point is that the Christian life includes some very hard teachings not shared by secular institutions. Compassion, empathy and

forgiveness are the unmistakable marks of the Christian life. What happens next with the two students is none of her business. Nor ours. Perhaps they will show mercy when they are next offended. Perhaps they will throttle the offender. That will be God's business. But what I do know is that the shame of being exposed and confronted, the disgrace of lying creates its own special torture. The parable tells us that only by accepting forgiveness and mercy and passing it on can we be liberated.

What more shall we learn from the Unforgiving Servant. I believe there are two lessons. The first has to do with each of us individually. Peter has asked Jesus a question. "Lord, how many times am I to forgive a member of the church? Seven times?" By the way, this more than doubles what the Pharisees recommend. Nope says Jesus. 77 times or 70x7 which equals exactly: as long as it takes, so often as needed. There is no fixed number. Because we are forgiven, our natural response ought to be to pay it forward - and magnanimously.

Before we go any further, we may want to be reminded about what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is not, as Anthony Bloom says, putting someone on probation so that we can punish their next infraction. Forgiveness is not denying that a wrong has been done or dismissing it as if it didn't really matter. We should not deny the seriousness of the offense or the importance of the relationship. Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting or condoning. Remembering may prevent it from happening again. Some behavior is inexcusable. Abuse cannot be tolerated. Forgiveness does not mean having to invite the person back into your life.

Forgiveness is canceling the debt. It is choosing to put aside blame, resentment and retribution – however *fair* it might be. It is loosening the chains that bind us as prisoners to the offense as Joseph did with his brothers. It is softening our hearts. If we don't forgive, we end up in a cycle of enslavement- tied to our dark feelings, trapped by our desire for vengeance and punishment - torture, indeed.

We know that it is not so quick and easy to forgive. We may choose to hold onto our grudge because it covers our hurt and makes us feel powerful. And who doesn't enjoy a little righteous indignation. But there's a toxic cost to holding back love and mercy. So we must try. It may take a long time and many attempts – say as many as 77.

And truth be known, as much as we pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", sometimes the offense is so devastating, the hurt so deep that we reach our human limits and have to turn it over to God and pray for release from our bitterness. And as far as I know, God will not deny us.

The second lesson reminds us that this parable is not just for individuals, but for the community. Jesus directs it to his disciples, the church. Peter's question tells us that he knows forgiveness will be an essential part of the Christian community. There will be misunderstandings, annoyances, and tensions, hurtful words and actions, even betrayals. We are to hold one another accountable for our behaviors and by the grace of God we are to forgive. That's fundamental to our common life.

In this strange and unsettling time as the church transitions from being a center of influence and power in DC, when the local pastor is no longer invited to comment on the latest Supreme Court ruling, when we cannot assume we share values or vocabulary or familiarity with stories from our bible, well then, that's when we must remember who we are. Whatever else is happening in the larger culture, we are distinguished by how we are church, living as Jesus taught us.

We have called this Habits of the Christian heart: worship and daily prayer, hospitality and service, sharing our faith to hearten one another – and most essentially offering and receiving forgiveness even and especially when it's hard. Contemporary theologian, L. Gregory Jones, writes this:

The Christian practice of forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life, a way that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The practice of forgiveness is not only, or primarily a way of dealing with guilt. Instead its central role is to reconcile, to restore communion with God and one another.

This way of life will always serve us.

I've been thinking about the next months for you. You've elected a fine Pastor Nominating Committee to begin the work of calling your next pastor. It must feel bittersweet – both exciting and sad in its own way. What will see you through is your commitment to continue who and how you are. "See how they love one another," wrote a 1st century theologian. Indeed, see how you love one another here at Clarence. You rock babies, teach children, mentor confirmands. You embrace visitors and new members, pray and care for the aging. You've helped establish Gigi's Playhouse and the Family Justice Center, and flown across the world to care for orphans. You house the Food Pantry and pray for its guests. You practice the Habits of the Heart and forgive as you have been forgiven.

This is your strength and your gift. This will see you through – this year and into the future – and only God knows what a blessing it may be outside these doors. So carry on dear Clarence Church. Carry on for Jesus sake. Amen.