

SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Mt. 18: 21-25

I find sermons on forgiveness a bit challenging. Not because I don't think forgiveness is important. It is central not just to our life of faith but also, I'd argue, our life together in this world. Without forgiveness, how could we possibly stay in relationship with each other? Forgiveness isn't something that only restores, the one forgiven. Forgiveness also restores and frees the one who forgives. Forgiveness creates possibility, keeps the future open, offers paths forward formerly not imaginable, and breaks the cosmic law of relentless cause-and-effect to create something new. Forgiveness is life.

Which is why Jesus doesn't just stretch Peter's imagination about forgiveness, but breaks it wide open. "Seven times," Peter asks. "Try seventy seven times, Jesus responds. Jesus is saying, way more than you thought, Peter. Way more than you imagined, way more than seems possible, way more – and this is probably what matters most – than you can actually count and keep track of. Because... to forgive is to live free in the present and hopeful about the future, while to not forgive is to be dragged down and kept captive by the past. Forgiveness is life.

Fine. But saying it doesn't make it happen. Which is probably what makes this parable so challenging. It's easy to get stuck on the enormity of the first servant's failure. How can the one forgiven so much refuse to forgive another? That's a fair question. Yet each of us has probably also struggled to forgive,

failed to notice where we have been forgiven or blessed or loved beyond what we can imagine deserving and still not extended the same to another. Even the benevolent king, having just forgiven a debt equivalent to the GDP of a small country, seems unable to forgive the first servant's inability to forgive.

So... is this parable a warning? *Forgive... or else!* Is it a lesson? *The first servant is already tortured by the inability to live as a free and forgiven person.* Is it encouragement, negatively framed? *Don't be like the unforgiving servant who was so preoccupied by the debts of others he missed the remission of debt he experienced.*

Or... is it simply an accurate description of just how hard forgiveness can be? Because... yeah, it's hard. Hard to let go of grievances which have not simply left their mark on us but have become part of our identity, part of the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Hard to let go of the habit of keeping track, of counting, of always assessing to make sure we're getting what we think we deserve.

So what do we do with a passage like this other than say, "you ought to forgive"?

Maybe simply, "You have been forgiven." And "You will be forgiven." All things. The things you've done. The things you've not done. Everything. Always.

Maybe the only way to address how hard it is to forgive is to remind each other that we have been and will be forgiven. Even this, of course, isn't a guarantee. After all, the first servant has been forgiven much and still fails. And we will, too. But this is a

parable, not an analogy. The king isn't God. Parables try to capture in narrative form something of what God is like and something of what God desires both for us and from us. Parables try to grab our attention, surprise us by grace, and shake us awake to embrace the life God offers us that we might offer the same to others. Parables are also just one part of the story, just one sliver of the larger truth Jesus came to share, and so can't be read in isolation of the rest of the Gospel.

The parables in Matthew, as we've noted before, seem often to have something of an edge to them. But they are embedded in a larger story. This parable doesn't – and doesn't have to – bear responsibility for telling the whole story of forgiveness. And one other important part of the story comes a bit later, again featuring Peter and the disciples, when Jesus says that the cup he gives, the blood of the covenant he pours out with his life, is for the “forgiveness of sin.” And these words are only in Matthew. That is, these words do not appear in Mark's telling of the scene, in Luke's narrative, or in Paul's remembrance. But they are in Matthew, spoken on the evening when his disciples will betray, deny, and abandon him, standing like a promise that even when we fail to live into the grace Jesus offers, even when we fall short of extending to others the forgiveness we have received, yet God is still there, forgiving, loving, beckoning us home.

Maybe that's where we need to go. Maybe in hearing once again of God's forgiveness our gaze will be lifted up from the constant keeping score that preoccupies us to see God's open hand of blessing. No guarantee, of course, but just the promise of grace and recognition that the ability to forgive is ultimately just as

much a gift as being forgiven is. And, fortunately, we worship a God who absolutely loves to give us incredible gifts. Amen.

- Pastor Dennis Schmidt