

Releasing Debts

Genesis 50:15-21 Matthew 18:21-3

Continuing our series on the Lord's Prayer. Our line from the prayer this morning: forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. I'm using Matthew's version because I like the concept of debts and debtors. Luke's version uses it too, actually ("forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone indebted to us"). We'll see from our parable why the debts language is useful. And the parable this morning gives us a very clear and somewhat stark presentation of the two parts of this petition from the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our debts (part 1), as we forgive our debtors (part 2)—although part 2 of the parable is a good example of a *bad* example of part 2! What *not* to do!

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if my brother or sister 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 (or, in some translations, seventy times seven)

23 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 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 servant 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 servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same servant, as he went out,

came upon one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹Then his fellow-servant 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 should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-servants 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 servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-servant, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over [to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.] ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to everyone, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

This is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God.

Here is a parable, which is clearly about forgiveness, but it is also an illustration of "your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven" because Jesus begins the story, like he does with most of the parables, with, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." So, what is the Kingdom that we pray to come on earth? The kingdom, in part, is where forgiveness and mercy are given and received. Part of God's Kingdom coming on earth is the practice of forgiveness. So, this parable covers two lines from the Lord's Prayer!

It's an intense parable, isn't it? And the line that we pray every week from the Lord's prayer about forgiveness is the part of the prayer the probably pinches the most. Jesus presents the story this way to grab our attention. Because God wants **us** to take to heart the practice of forgiveness. Because unforgiveness is a

costly thing, emotionally, spiritually and relationally—when people become spiritual accountants and keep a ledger of “who owes me what” in terms of offenses against them.

Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to pray “forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors*” or, in some translations, “as we forgive those who are indebted to us.” See, unforgiveness says, “He owes me. She owes me.” There is a debt to pay. Forgiveness from the heart says, “No one owes me anything.” That’s the ultimate freedom: no one owes me anything. I owe God a debt of gratitude, and that’s it. That’s why I think this use of debts and debtors from the parable and from Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is a useful way of looking at this.

The language of “sins” and “sins against us” is good too. Or “trespasses”—those are modified versions of what Jesus actually teaches, based on church tradition. And they are good. But I like the image of being able to say, “No one owes me...” There are no debts to pay; I’ve thrown away the ledger. And if I do feel like someone owes me something, then I know I have some work to do.

And so Jesus is earnest about this because he wants relationships to thrive, and he wants people to be free of the burden of holding onto things that they don’t need to.

This morning's parable is inspired by a question: How many times shall I forgive? That's a good question Peter asks. Jesus' reply is kind of staggering: not seven, but seventy-seven! Or in some versions of the Bible, "seventy times seven" (490). Please don't get sidetracked by the math here. It's irrelevant. This is a figure of speech. Jesus' answer is, in essence, "Not seven...but ongoing! Jesus is not saying, "Forgive them 77 times, but on the 78th time, THEN you can let 'em have it." He *is* saying, "I want you to be people who are consistently open to forgiveness." And so he tells them this story, this parable.

And the interesting thing is that the story does not really deal at all with repetitious offenses, or with how many times to forgive. It deals with *the heart open to forgiveness*. True forgiveness has to do with a heart that is open to forgiveness. The last line, at the end of the parable, about forgiving from the heart is the main point: forgiveness is a matter of the heart, of sincerity—not of how many times. Jesus doesn't want us to be spiritual accountants, keeping a ledger of offenses and pardons. What he's after is a soft and compassionate heart. A willing heart. Willingness is the key.

And I want to point out, so we don't misunderstand: while forgiveness is something that we are called to be open to and consistently work toward, it does not mean that in ongoing harmful situations we allow someone to continue

harmful behavior. The New Testament gives us some good guidance about those kinds of situations—when someone causing harm doesn't humbly change ('repent'), and there are good principles taught about how we protect and honor persons.

So, when Jesus says we must forgive 70 times 7, that doesn't mean we let bad behavior continue 70 times 7. We forgive, **and** we protect ourselves, or our family, or an organization. It's why churches write strong policies that protect and honor people. Reconciliation is a hoped-for outcome, but that requires a change of behavior.

Back to the parable... This parable, like many of Jesus' parables, contains ridiculous, over-the-top aspects, somewhat silly even, but they are there to get our attention and make a point. In the first part of the story is the king who decides to settle his accounts with his servants, and is confronted with a man who owed him 10,000 talents. Again, the specific number is not the important thing, but it is symbolic. 10,000 was the biggest *number* used in the Middle Eastern number system at that time. And the talent was the largest *unit* in the Middle Eastern *money* system at that time. Jesus is going full hyperbole here! You think we preachers exaggerate things from time to time?! One talent represented about 15 years' wages for the day laborer. So, if you want to calculate this: the

guy owed him 150,000 *years'* worth of wages. It's ridiculously huge. It's so ridiculous it's funny.

Ten thousand talents is like saying "a zillion dollars." This is debt beyond comprehension. It's more than the Gross National Product of most countries in the world. That's what 10,000 talents is. For all intents and purposes, it is infinite. This is debt that this man cannot repay. Even if he and his whole family were sold into slavery, it wouldn't make a teeny dent in the amount owed.

So the man begs, "Be patient with me..." He knows he can never pay, but he says he will anyway because he doesn't even dare to be so presumptuous as to ask for the debt to be forgiven. He will work for the rest of his life, and his children and grandchildren will do the same with the huge burden always on their backs. It is hopeless. *There is nothing he can do on his own, through his own effort or resources, to save himself.* That's the point. That's why the humorous and ridiculous amount of debt. It can't be repaid. He can't save himself.

However... The king hears the cry of the man's heart. And he "took pity on him," Jesus says. He had compassion. It's the same word, the same compassion that the father had upon seeing the prodigal son returning home. This is the same word that describes what Jesus felt upon seeing the large crowd, "He had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd "(Matthew

9:36; Mark 6:34). This is Jesus, standing before the tomb of Lazarus, weeping; his heart breaking. The king's heart also breaks, his heart goes out, and he has compassion. He doesn't just give the man time to pay, as was requested. He goes much, much further. Way beyond what was reasonable or even generous. He forgave the debt. Canceled, ripped up the IOU, no need to pay anything, you don't owe me anything, the king says; you are free. What a picture of forgiveness and mercy and sheer grace. "Forgive us our debts" is fulfilled.

But that is only half of the line in the Lord's Prayer—part 1. Now we get to the "as we forgive our debtors" part. And this part of the story isn't as pretty, as Jesus tells it. Inexplicably, the forgiven, graced servant walks out the door of pure grace, and into the hall of harsh justice. A colleague owes him one hundred denarii. One denarius was one day's wages. So the debt is a hundred days wages. Three months' pay, give or take. Not inconsequential, but by comparison... it took 6000 denarii to make one talent. The man had been forgiven 10,000 talents. So, that's 60 million denarii he had been forgiven by the king. And he is owed 100 by a fellow worker. So he has been forgiven *over 600,000 times as much*. Again, it's an over-the-top, ridiculous aspect of the story, to make a point. Because now he harshly demands justice. He wants what is owed to him—the debt must be paid immediately.

And when his coworker, (his fellow human being, let's put it that way) falls to *his* knees and begs, with literally the same words he just used on his knees with the king, words that should sound so very familiar... they fall on deaf ears. The friend is carted off to debtor's prison; there is no forgiveness until the debt is paid. And nothing happens until others in the community, distressed and saddened, go to the king and explain it all.

Now, there's a voice inside me that says in frustration, and even a bit of compassion for this guy, "How could he do this? How could he be such a fool? How could he receive such a huge gift, and then demand such a pittance?" But another voice in me says, quietly, and sheepishly, I get it. I understand. Because I, too, have received grace upon grace from God, yet sometimes treat other people with harsh justice. Because I believe that they owe me something.

Well, the king is now rightfully incredulous. "I forgave you all your debt... shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow just as I had mercy on you?" And seeing that the man dealt with his coworker by demanding what he was owed, the king dealt with him accordingly, and threw him into prison. A prison of his own making. That's the point of part 2. He did this to himself.

And so Jesus teaches his church about forgiveness. I think Jesus knew how difficult forgiveness can be, which is why he talked about it so much—at least 10

times in Matthew's gospel alone Jesus teaches on it. Forgiving someone, and asking for forgiveness is difficult work. Difficult to initiate, difficult to know if it has worked. There are so many issues to sort out.

It may be helpful as we think about forgiveness and work at practicing it, to be aware of what forgiveness is, and what it is not:

- Forgiveness is not saying what another person did was okay. In fact it is the opposite – it's acknowledging that it *wasn't* ok. We should never minimize a hurt if it's a real hurt ("no big deal"). Forgiveness *does* mean removing ourselves as judge, and giving the other over to God, who is the better justice-maker. But if the hurt is real, we shouldn't give the tough nut response and say "I'm fine." "No big deal."
- Forgiveness is not forgetting. You've probably heard the phrase "forgive and forget" and maybe that's possible with lesser offenses. But forgiveness does not *require* forgetting. If that is the case, we are all in trouble. In fact, I may have done forgiveness work toward someone who has caused injury, and then something triggers a memory—and old feelings of hurt come up, and I have to let go again. But it doesn't take as much time, over time. It gets easier. But we should never feel like we're *supposed to* forget;

because it may make us feel guilty if (or when) memories visit us. What matters is continuing the work of forgiveness, over time.

- Forgiveness is not first convincing someone that they have wronged you. If we are waiting for an apology or confession first, we will never be free. In forgiveness we are giving someone a gift they may not have asked for, and might not even deserve – we are giving mercy. Like the apostle Paul says about Jesus: “While we were sinners, Christ died for us.” Not “After we asked for mercy, Christ died for us.” He didn’t wait for our apology or confession. He made the first move. And God asks us to do the same, at the right time.
- Forgiveness doesn’t necessarily require us dealing directly with the other person; it’s a matter of heart, first.
- Forgiveness is not feeling it, it is choosing it. And (because of that),
- Forgiveness is not... easy. Because we have to deal with the hurt first and touch the emotional core. To that end, if we forgive too quickly or too soon, we short-circuit the healing that God can and wants to do in our heart—and perhaps in the heart of the other. So, sometimes getting to a place of real forgiveness takes time. It shouldn’t be hurried.

Again, forgiveness is not simply forgetting something that happened so much as choosing to move forward, choosing to accept God's healing for ourselves, and working to let go. Forgiveness happens inside of us first. It is between us and God first. It has to do with *our* healing. So, forgiveness is an inside job. Like joy. Joy is an inside job because it's a decision I make. Same with forgiveness.

I was reminded this week that the Greek word for "forgive" comes from the same root as "let" or "relinquish." Basically, it means, to let something go. Release something. To stop fussing over it. As applied to forgiveness, it means that we give that circumstance, or that person to God, and let God work on *our* heart. In forgiveness there is a sense of moving on.

Lewis Smedes: "You forgive somebody and you begin to dance instead of wallow. You walk with God, in the heart of God. You set a prisoner free, and you discover that the prisoner you set free was you." That's why Jesus says forgiveness is a matter of the heart—*our* heart.

Joseph is a great example of someone who danced in forgiveness, and not only became a free person himself, but also set his brothers free. He could've held onto resentment—he was treated horribly by his brothers—but Joseph saw a bigger picture of God at work. And the magnificent line from Joseph captures all

of this; he says to his brothers, “Am I in the place of God? Even if you intended it for harm, God intended it for good.” It may take time, but there is a bigger picture we’re sometimes meant to see.

But forgiveness can become complicated. Do you forgive someone who never said they were sorry? Archbishop Desmond Tutu says if we don’t, then we continue to be their victim. What if the person who hurt us has died, or we know we’ll never see them again? Do we forgive? *Can* we forgive? I think we have to learn *how to* in those situations, otherwise we languish under a burden if we’re holding onto the hurt. We must deal honestly with the hurt, and let God heal us. And release that person to God.

But I want to say again that forgiveness is not the same as good feelings. Sometimes forgiveness means letting go, in spite of our feelings. The feelings will come along later. Feelings follow, they don’t lead. Feelings matter and can act like a gauge, to tell us how much it hurts (like a nurse may ask, “On a scale from 1 to 10, what’s your pain level?”), but feelings don’t dictate to us whether or not we forgive. Maybe they can help determine *when*, or how long it will take, but not *if*.

Again, forgiveness can take time. All of these are issues which must be sorted out if forgiveness is to occur.

But forgiveness contains the power of transformation, and of healing— healing our hearts, and potentially healing relationships, and leading to reconciliation, which is a beautiful thing. But Jesus' parable is not about the specifics of forgiveness in different situations. Jesus knows that we will all forgive on different timelines, in our own unique ways based on our unique personalities, and according to the uniqueness of the circumstances that we have experienced.

Jesus never talks about specifics, or how-to's of forgiveness—here, or anywhere. In this parable it is more basic than that. It is about our basic posture before God and other people: a posture of humility, of gratitude for God's grace and mercy, and recognizing that we all fall short of the glory of God. Yet God's glory is that continues to forgive about seventy times seven billion times seven (let's just call it a bazillion!).

Ephesians 4:32 the apostle Paul sums this up nicely: "Be tenderhearted and compassionate toward one another, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ as forgiven you."

Our prayer for this week: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Ask ourselves: Is there someone I need to forgive? Do I need to be forgiven for something? Is there something I need to confess? This could be the week of

taking steps toward mending a relationship, or confessing your part, or simply asking God for help with something you've perhaps been holding onto.

If you're 'debt free' (no one owes you anything) then as you pray this line, you can pray for people you know who have strained relationships, and pray for them.