

“Forgiving Our Neighbor”

Matthew 18: 21-35

After a few weeks of special Sunday services, we pick back up with our “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” sermon series and of course, we don’t pick up with a particular easy topic. No we pick up with forgiveness. Probably one of the hardest things we are called to do as people of faith. We might be able to understand the concept with our minds but man...living it out. It’s hard.

Yes, we know our Bible speaks about forgiveness more than once, in both the Old and New Testaments. Yes, we know that we have been told we “ought” to forgive. Yes, we know that forgiveness is more for us than for the other person, meaning that forgiveness releases us from the past so that we can embrace life here and now. We know all these things but knowing them and doing them are two different things.

Forgiveness is hard. We do a disservice as communities of faith to ourselves and to others when we believe or say otherwise. So knowing this, maybe it’s time we talk about forgiveness openly without the “oughts” and “should” that are usually attached to it. Maybe it’s time, beyond time we put aside what we ought to do and take a look at why forgiveness is essential for relationships and for community as people of faith. Maybe it’s time we take a look at forgiveness

without the guilt that is usually attached to it and have an open conversation as to why it is mentioned so many times in our faith story as disciples of Christ.

First please hear me say...forgiveness is not indifference to wrong. It is not a “get out of jail free” card that we are supposed to give to the other person so that he or she can repeatedly keep hurting us while we pretend we do not feel betrayed or wounded. Forgiveness is not carelessness nor is it the absence of any ethical behavior. In fact the opposite is true. True forgiveness is respecting the relationship enough to take it seriously. True forgiveness is realizing that at the center of everything, even forgiveness, there is grace.

However, again please hear me say, forgiveness cannot be forced nor can forgiveness be commanded. Sometimes it takes time, a really long time for us to offer forgiveness to others and yes, sometimes, the process of forgiveness is simply too hard. There is too much hurt. Too much pain. Naming this is part of the healing process, part of the reconciliation process. Sometimes time is needed to rebuild the relationship. And that is okay.

Second, as we continue our conversation about forgiveness, we said a few weeks ago, there’s judgement and then there’s Judgment with a capital J. Same rules apply for the concept of forgiveness. There’s forgiveness and then there’s Forgiveness with a capital “F”. One is human and one is divine. In order for us to

wrap our minds around this, we need to look at our text in context. We have to see what's going on around it to gain understanding. As we all know, no Scripture text ever stands alone on its own. It is always part of a chapter and story which tells a wider story, a story that goes beyond just a single verse. Even when our devotionals pull out a single verse to inspire us, the writers are grounding that verse in the wider story of God's grace and mercy.

Okay so context for our text today...I want us to pull out our Bibles again and turn to Matthew 18. Take a few minutes and read it as a unit. I'll wait....

This section is Jesus' teachings on relationships within the Christian community. Our text comes as the last part of this section. In the verses right before our text today, Jesus tells the disciples that if there is a disagreement between believers, work it out between you. Don't hold parking lot meetings. Don't whisper or gossip behind their backs to stir up trouble. (That's the HMW translation, the Heather Woodruff McColl version) What Jesus asks the disciples to do is go to that person, tell him or her how they hurt you. If that person won't listen, go back again, this time with witnesses and try again. If that person still does not listen, tell the church. Again hear me say. Jesus is not telling the disciples to air out their dirty laundry in front of the church just to cause trouble. He is telling them to acknowledge that this hurt is hurting all of them. It is breaking the community between them. Jesus is calling for them to come together and work it

out together. The operative word being...together. Jesus reminds the disciples that the relationship is the key.

After a few more verses about agreeing on earth and agreeing in heaven, then we get Peter's question. This is a very human, very value based question. Jesus has just told the disciples to work on their relationships and like all of us, the first thing that comes to mind is how many times are we supposed to do that? Isn't there a limit?

Now to give Peter credit, he does go with seven as his answer, a biblical number and a number which is greater than what is required in rabbinical tradition. But Jesus like he always does turns things upside down. Jesus says seventy times seven or in other translations it is seventy seven times. Most biblical scholars go with seventy seven times because back in Genesis, Cain' son said that he will take his revenge seventy seven times on a guy who wounded him. Scholars think Matthew is trying to again connect the wider story of God, showing that where humans seek vengeance, God reverses that with grace.

All this is to say, that Jesus realizes the absurdity of his response. No human is ever going to be that gracious when it comes to forgiving. He throws out this incredible impossible number and as we are still trying to wrap our mind around it,

Jesus tells us this parable, to illustrate the s “f” forgiveness and the “F” forgiveness.

Again, a word of caution as we read this parable. We cannot and should not put God in the place of the King. When we do, we get a picture of our God that goes against everything we know and let’s be honest, a picture of a God that scares us to death rather than invites us to be in relationship with God as people of faith.

Matthew intentionally starts the parable out with the words “The Kingdom of God is like...” pushing us to move our minds off human things to view the concept of forgiveness through the lens of the Kingdom of God, meaning God is God and we are not. Let me say that again...God is God and we are not.

Matthew gives us this deceptively simply parable which stays with us after we have heard it. We keep coming back to it. We keep questioning it. We keeping gleaning meaning from it. That’s what Matthew wants us to do. That’s the purpose of a parable. That’s why Jesus uses them to teach so that those with eyes will see and those with ears will hear.

In this parable we get a ruler who discovers that one of his governors has misused some funds, and not just some funds but an absurd amount of funds, funds that would take three lifetimes to repay. The king plans to throw not only this governor, but his wife and his children, his in laws, and his little dog too in prison,

torturing them, selling them until the debt was paid. Again, Matthew's audience knows that there is no way for this debt to ever be paid. All hope is lost.

Until...this governor comes to the king and pleads.

The thing we should not miss is that we are told the king is moved out of pity to do something. A better translation is the out of compassion, the king decides to forgive the debt.

Then we are told that when this same governor decides to get his house in order, he discovers one of his officials has misused some funds. So he decides to seek action against that official. This official owes about \$10, something that could easily be paid back. However, the governor fails to offer compassion when the one comes to him. Instead, he ignores his pleas and decides to throw his official and all his family, yes, even his little dog too, into prison, destroying their lives forever.

The king hears about this, calls the governor back and asks why...why could the governor not offer to forgive that person's debts when he had been forgiven so much. The governor is thrown in prison and then Matthew very pastorally, please hear the sarcasm in my voice, has Jesus say this is what God will do to you if you do not extend mercy to those who ask it of you.

I know crazy right? Matthew just makes our relationship with forgiveness even more complicated with that one line. However, again to give Matthew credit,

as I have lived with this text this past week, I kept coming back to what he says in that last verse. Matthew says: And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy." It is that whole "doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy", that piece about someone asking for it.

That's what I keep coming back to as I read this passage. Please hear me say that by no means do I have this all figured out but...but I do wonder why Matthew added that particular piece. We know being in relationship with others means that we are called to take them seriously. We take their joys, their concerns, their hurts, everything we experience in life together, we are called to take these things seriously when we are in relationship with one another, when we are in relationship with others. Which also means acknowledging when we hurt them. It means also acknowledging when they hurt us. It means extending grace when they ask.

Because you see the thing of it is "forgiveness is never not part of our lives. It is never not part of our relationships. It is part and parcel of the Kingdom of God."

Again hear me say. I don't have all the answers. I wish I did because then I would know how to end this sermon and we could all go home, feeling good about ourselves. But I can't do that. What I will do is come back to this parable.

Forgiveness was asked...only to be given by one and withheld from another. And I think that makes all the difference. We who have been forgiven much are not asked to be perfect. No, Matthew is simply pointing out that we who have missed the mark time and time again of becoming the people God calls us to be, if we have been shown grace and forgiveness, how can we deny it to someone who asks it of us? Matthew again is asking us to change our center...move away from human things and center ourselves in the values of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew wants us to realize that forgiveness is a two way street. If someone asks it of us, we do more damage to the relationship, to the community, when we treat it like a commodity, when we use it to hold power over someone.

Or let me say it this way...again God is God and we are not. When forgiveness is simply too hard or we are not sure we have it in us, what we can do is pray. "we can pray for forgiveness, for the ability to forgive those – alive or dead – who have hurt us, even if we have distanced ourselves from them for good reason. And we can pray that we forgive ourselves some of our own regrets, mistakes, and hurts, and even the inability to forgive others. And we can pray that we are able to accept the forgiveness of others when it is extended. And above all, we can pray that God keeps bringing us to church week in and week out so that we hear of God's intention and promise us to forgive us and to form and fashion us into a community of love and forgiveness, a community, that is, that sees in Jesus'

cross the token of God's pledge to forgive all and in Jesus' resurrection the always
present possibility of an open future... Amen.