

## **"The Power of Forgiveness"**

Matthew 18:21-35  
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### The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

"Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive..." So said C.S. Lewis, in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*. He continues,

...then to mention the subject is to be greeted by howls of laughter. It may be hard to acknowledge my need for forgiveness, but it is a whole lot harder to extend forgiveness to someone who needs it from me.

He has a point, doesn't he? Much of human history, after all, is based on the opposite premise—that an appropriate and even justifiable response to an affront is revenge, getting even. It's here in the Bible, after all, "An eye for an eye." Never mind that the outcome of an eye for an eye is two blind people instead of one, and that the larger community will now be impacted by that action as a result.

I had forgotten about the incident until recently, when I was reminded of it during a conversation about church security. At my previous church, I arrived early for work one morning. As I approached the door, I could see inside and saw a man with a shopping cart, preparing to exit the church.

When he pushed the locked door open from the inside, I actually held the door for him so he could get his shopping cart through the door. I said hello and he said hello in response. Inside his shopping cart was some kind of machine. I assumed him to be a repairman who was simply going about his business and doing his job.

A couple of hours later, I heard a commotion in the outer office area and so I walked out of my office to see what had everyone excited. My assistant said to me, "The paper folding machine is gone! It simply vanished!" It was at that point that I realized that the man I'd held the door for that morning, had actually snuck into the church and spent the night. In the morning he simply made his exit quietly, with something in his shopping cart to pawn. And I held the door for him as he wheeled the church's \$1,200 paper folding machine out the door!

My immediate response, when I realized what had taken place, was not forgiveness, but rage. I was embarrassed that I hadn't put two and two together and figured out what was happening. I'd been too trusting and the church was taken advantage of. I can handle personal attacks and criticisms, but mess with the church, take advantage of the church and I see red.

Within each of us, I think, is this sense of self that when wronged or violated wants very much to retaliate and get even. It is deep within us. When we are wronged, our first reaction is rage. And if you have ever been wronged, you know how close to the surface that emotion resides.

Well, the Christian faith teaches that when life is lived under God's reign, people forgive one another. It teaches that our health and our wholeness depends on knowing that the one who created us also loves us, and is willing to forgive us and accept us. The part of the equation that is often largely overlooked is that this forgiveness is not without cost. In fact it cost God a great deal to forgive us and, in turn, it costs us a great deal to experience forgiveness.

Think about it. The cost is we must forgive in order to experience forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It's one sentence and Jesus taught us to pray that way. In other words, the cost of grace is grace—a lovely irony that only God could have invented.

One day Jesus told a parable about it. The story is actually in response to Peter who, in typical, shortsighted fashion, but while bringing some game to the conversation, asks Jesus, "How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me, as many as seven times?"

Now, Peter knows that for centuries the rabbis have been teaching that if someone sins against you, forgive them three times. After the fourth time, all bets are off. How generous of Peter to offer up seven times, almost like he's expecting Jesus to congratulate him for his expansive mercy. Peter's problem here, however, is that he hasn't heard the good news. He's still counting and calculating.

But instead, Jesus turns the whole thing on its head. "Not seven but seventy-seven." And that is not to be taken literally. It means there are no limits or restrictions on forgiveness. There is no more counting or keeping score anymore. And then the parable.

A servant owed his king a tremendous debt—10,000 talents. The king is preparing to exercise his only option which, I suppose, would be to sell the slave and recoup a little of the money he is owed. But the servant begs for mercy, promising to repay the debt. The proposal is supposed to sound laughable. One talent was worth a day's pay. This man owes 10,000 talents, so even simple math shows the man is promising to work for twenty-five years. It's simply not a payable debt.

But the king doesn't laugh. Instead, he does the unthinkable. Instead of selling the man further into slavery, he forgave him the debt. And that's unheard of, until you think about it for a while, and then it actually makes some sense. Now the king as a forgiven servant instead of an angry slave and a few dollars in his pocket. The king may be further ahead as a result.

Except that this forgiven servant now goes out and does something altogether and embarrassingly human. He comes across someone who owes him a few dollars and demands that he pay what he owes. The debtor pleads for more time but our guy refuses, and has his debtor thrown into prison. When the king hears about it, he is furious with him and, in his anger, has the man thrown into prison. Then, without missing a beat, Jesus says, "So God will do to each one of you unless you forgive one another from the heart."

Well that's a profound idea when you think about it. Linked together, like they go hand in hand, are being forgiven and forgiving. There is a mystical connection between the two acts. We experience grace by extending it. Remember, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The experience of grace and the discipline of grace are one in the same.

And yet why is this so hard for us to execute? What is it about us that makes us so intent on keeping and settling scores? We keep lists of all the times we were slighted and wronged. Who hasn't replayed those hurtful times over and over in our heads, recalling the specifics of what was said and what was done, almost savoring them while waiting for the opportune moment when we can unload full barrel on the unsuspecting offending party. Sometimes our relationships wallow in that stuff for years, so that when the opportunity comes to unload, you know that the offended person has been waiting for years for this chance to relive it all over again.

Sadly, that's how we are, apparently, but it's not the way we have to be. Jesus suggested an alternative way—a better way and one that is far more creative. It's restorative and not destructive. It's called

forgiveness, and Jesus understood that it belongs to the one who has been offended. The offender can apologize and try to make amends, but ultimately, the extension of forgiveness is the offended one's to give.

Never have I seen that demonstrated more powerfully than in a presentation I heard, made by the families whose loved ones had been murdered, who were nonetheless speaking out in opposition to capital punishment. One by one they articulated how the execution of the guilty one wouldn't bring back their loved one. Another death would not bring closure or healing, or make the world more peaceful. In fact it would inflict further pain on another unsuspecting family.

There was a mother whose daughter had been murdered by a man. She said that for twelve years, since the time of her murder, she was consumed by her desire for revenge. And then one day, she wrote a letter to the man who had murdered her daughter, telling him that she had forgiven him. She said as soon as she put that letter in the mail, she felt an instant sense of healing. Extending forgiveness to the one in prison actually released the one imprisoned by her own anger and desire for revenge.

The good news we celebrate as Christians, is that God is capable of amazing grace. And we see it in the life of Jesus, the Christ. In him we know a love with the power to restore rather than destroy. A love bursting with new possibilities. A powerful love that can take the broken pieces of precious human relationships and actually put them back together again.

It's the reason we dare to claim it with certainty, every single Sunday, "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

Thanks be to God!

Amen.