

Matthew 18:21-35

"The Absurdity of Grace"

Forgiveness. A simple word – easy to pronounce, easy to spell. Only three syllables. But such a complex issue. However, forgiveness is essential to our lives. Without it marriages will crumble, families will fall apart, friendships will disintegrate, nations will always be at war. Studies have even shown that unforgiveness – that is holding on to past hurts and resentments – deeply affect our physical, emotional and spiritual health.

So why don't we just do it? Well the truth is that there is not just a "one answer fits all" to forgiveness. And Peter, that beloved disciple who was born with no filter between his mouth and his brain, asks Jesus how often he must forgive someone in his church. So this story is told in response to *that* question. "Jesus, my buddies James and John took all the credit for the new Sunday School Class that started last week even though it was all my idea. Now everyone is looking at them as if they hung the moon and it really ticks me off! So, how many times do I have to forgive them? Is seven enough?"

Of course, Peter, like most of us, is not thinking about how many times *he* has been forgiven for things in the past that he has done wrong. And Jesus wants to say, "Peter, when we live in the church we are called to live a life that is faithful to the teachings of the church. So THAT is a really STUPID question." But Jesus, being Jesus, is a little more subtle. So he answers, "No Peter seven is not enough. But how about seventy-seven?"

Now experts on the Scriptures have argued for hundreds of years about the answer because some translations say "seventy TIMES seven". Truth be told, both numbers are ridiculous and that is the point. Ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer. Because Peter,

since you can never live up to the grace that has been shown to you, you can NEVER repay that grace. It is absurd. Seven or seventy-seven or seventy TIMES seven will not pay your debt. Grace has been given to you. Forgiveness because God loves you.

Then to make sure Peter understands how absurd his question is, Jesus tells a parable that is just *as* absurd. It seems a certain slave had racked up debts worth ten thousand talents. Well, friends, ONE TALENT was equivalent to a whole year's wages in Jesus' day. So how could anyone have incurred that much debt? This, too, would be absurd. Yet Jesus plays out the scenario for everyone listening. And the king's desire to forgive so quickly symbolizes God's desire to show grace to you and me. Because it is not the king's DESIRE to punish anyone in his kingdom.

That is the first thing that I learned as I studied this passage. Just as the king did not really want to punish the slave, so our Heavenly Father does not wish to punish us. **It is not God's desire that we should receive punishment for sins.** It is God's desire that we will look at the example that Jesus Christ taught us and then choose in our hearts to repent. Because it is only when we acknowledge the debt of our sin that we can completely appreciate the absurdity of God's grace.

But Jesus will not let the story end there. This same slave, the one who was excused of more than a lifetime of debt, walks away a free man and immediately meets a fellow who owed him about an hour's worth of wages. And instead of showing grace to his friend, he had him thrown into prison! It seems that the slave has missed the experience of grace altogether.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace". He says it is "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance". Cheap grace is to hear the gospel preached as follows: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the

consolations of forgiveness." The main problem of such a statement is that it contains no demand for discipleship. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.

In contrast to cheap grace, costly grace calls us to follow Jesus. Costly grace comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the remorseful heart. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." (1)

Now up until this point, I don't really think that I have said anything too radical. Remember, Peter's question is about forgiving people *in the church*. And since the church is meant to be a uniquely forgiving community, forgiving one another in the church is not hard at all, right? Well, even if that were true – what about the rest of the world?

You see, as a preacher, I can give you one theological explanation after another about why we should forgive. As a teacher, I can Google passage after passage in the Bible about forgiveness. But as a pastor, as someone who collects people's stories as part of my call, it is not that easy. Someone asked me once to describe my job in one word and I told them that I am a storycatcher.

And as a storycatcher, I have heard about marriages that failed because of infidelity. I have cried with someone who walked in on her mother being abuse and suddenly remembered the abuse that she too, had suffered as a child but had buried it so deeply as a way of dealing with her pain.

As a storycatcher I have held someone at the grave of her father as she wept with regret that she had not come to visit more often. I have held someone's hand as they confessed a

shameful sin before their death. And I have listened to someone recount the horrors of child sexual abuse, more than one time.

None of us are immune to the pain and brokenness of life. I myself was interrupted from my work one day when a woman who I had always looked up to, someone that I considered a role model for Christian living, came into my office, accused me of doing things that I had not done, questioned my motives and called me a liar. When she was finished, the Holy Spirit actually gave me the grace to tell her that I was grateful that we were such close friends that she could be so honest with me and then offered to tell her my side of the story. Her reply was, "I have no interest in your side of the story."

That was over twenty years ago. That woman, who I know had a good heart and lived a life of faith and discipleship, died this year. And there was never any reconciliation between us. I did not go to her service. And now forgiveness is even harder.

So the preacher in me can dissect this passage with ease and the teacher in me can tell you all the do's and don't's about forgiving. But the pastor in me has caught enough stories to know how hard forgiving can be. And the person that I am has experienced enough hurt to know that forgiving can be easier said than done.

So while Peter's question is really about forgiving in the church, I believe there are two important reasons that Matthew includes this parable in his Gospel. All of us need to forgive. And sometimes we can't because we don't understand what forgiveness is NOT. Forgiving is not excusing. Forgiveness is what is required precisely when there is no good rationale to explain away why someone did what they did. Forgiving does not mean tolerating bad behavior or pretending that what someone did was not so bad. It is what we do when there is nothing left to do!

Forgiving is not trivializing. It is NOT saying that what happened is not horrendous. When we are dealing with rape, the Holocaust, child abuse, September 11th, we don't say "It was nothing". This takes away all meaning from healing AND forgiveness and makes putting pain behind us almost impossible.

Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is what's required precisely when we CANNOT forget. It is unrealistic to expect ourselves to forget something that has wounded us deeply. The wound actually becomes a part of who we are. Now this does NOT mean that we should DWELL on the wrong done to us. It just means that it will always be there. It is like a physical scar. When you have a scar somewhere on your body, EVERY TIME YOU LOOK AT IT, you remember how you got it. Over time, the scars fades but it may NEVER become completely invisible. And just as it fades, when you look at it, the pain fades but you NEVER really forget.

Also, by remembering the wrongs that have been done to us, we come to understand that God is in control and can use every circumstance to bring about good for His kingdom, even if we don't understand it. This is made clear every time we look at the cross.

Finally, forgiveness is not easy. In fact it is a completely unnatural act. It is achingly difficult and long after you have forgiven the deed, the wound lives on in your memory. Especially when the one you need to forgive is yourself. But remember I said that there are two reasons that I believe Matthew includes this story in his writing.

Jesus teaches Peter that God's absurd grace is unconditional. Yet often, we want to place conditions on our forgiveness. We want revenge, we want to get even. We want to choke someone's throat. So Jesus' answer about the number of times we need to forgive moves us towards the realization of the conditions that we place on our forgiveness as well and help us forgive unconditionally as God does.

So Jesus helps Peter understand that, in order to remove those conditions, we might need to ask ourselves: How much do you owe God? Because it is so much easier to think about what is owed to me? How often have you prayed "Forgive me God, I'll do better next time." Then next time comes along... and it requires opening our wallet, or giving up some time... and oh well... next time God. Forgive me for not living as a disciple...you really matter to me... just not on Saturday night at 11:30 or during football practice or when I cut that guy off in traffic. Sorry I haven't prayed in a long time God BUT can you help me now? How often do we take the grace of God for granted? How often do we justify cheap grace?

But above all, I believe that Jesus answers Peter the way that he does because Jesus came that we might have abundant life. And friends, not forgiving gives the offender the power to live in our heads when he or she does not deserve it. There is an oft told story about a Prisoner of War who asked another if he had forgiven his captors yet. His friend replied, "Oh no, I will never do that." And the response was, "Then they still have you in prison, don't they?" And just as the king does not desire to punish the slave, Jesus does not desire for us to remain in prison. But forgiveness is a choice, not an emotion.

Basically, I believe that Peter is asking if his forgiveness must be perfect. Jesus answers that it must be beyond perfect. He places human forgiveness in the context of the absurd – Divine forgiveness. That is why we pray, "Forgive us debts as we forgive our debtors." And when we pray this way we, like Jesus are saying, "Just do it and don't keep count Peter. Do not plague yourself with the question of how many or how long or how deep or how wide. Just forgive." Of course we know that showing absurd grace to one another is impossible. But because we are forgiven from being debtors, we are freed to be disciples. And so we can STRIVE to achieve perfect forgiveness by our living. By trying our very best to love others as

God has loved us. "Actual acts of compassion are the true measure of those who know God's forgiveness". (2) May we go from this place, forgiven and freed by the one who calls us to love on another – absurdly. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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- (1) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.
- (2) Kathryn Blanchard, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011, p.72.