

The Bare Minimum

Matthew 18:21-35

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“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’

Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’” (Matt. 18:21-22).

When Pastor Katie and I plan worship, we often do so weeks in advance.

Whether you know it or not, we are a church that follows the Revised Common Lectionary to guide our focal scripture passage each week. The Revised Common Lectionary, or RCL, is a three-year cycle of scripture selections. Each Sunday, four passages are provided: an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading.

What this lectionary does is narrow down the entire breadth of the Bible to a more manageable four passages for me to choose from as I prepare to preach each week. Even more importantly, it prevents me from preaching on only my favorite passages. In other words, it sets a discipline for me to preach from the passages and themes the lectionary dictates, rather than allowing me to default to my favorite stories. And, hopefully, that means it also provides you with a healthier scriptural diet than if I was simply relying on my personal favorites each week.

Consider this week’s passage, for example. If left to my own devices, I would never preach this passage. I’d be like Dawn with her word star! I’d put it back and ask for another, please!

Why? Because forgiveness is hard.

When we think of forgiveness, our heads fill with extreme examples:

An armed man walks into a one-room school house deep in Pennsylvania Amish country and shoots ten girls before turning the gun on himself. If you’re like me, what you remember most about that tragedy is that almost immediately the Amish community extended their complete *forgiveness* to the gunman.

After the bombing in Oklahoma City, there is a citywide memorial service. Dr. Billy Graham is asked to speak. He begins by saying something like, “We are here with you to let the healing begin. We are here to show you that a nation stands beside you in your grief. We are here to *forgive*.”

After decades and decades of rape, murder, and violence committed against the black people of South Africa under the system of apartheid, President Nelson Mandela, along

with Christian Bishop Desmond Tutu and many others, decide that the only way forward for their people is forgiveness for those who committed the atrocities. They determine that anything less will continue to tear their country apart. So, they set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and decide that if perpetrators will confess to the violences they have committed, their crimes will be completely *forgiven*. No trial, no sentencing, no punishment will follow.

They are extreme examples of forgiveness, and I think we gravitate to extreme examples, because they are so far above and beyond our experiences that we can then say we agree with the theological *principle* of forgiveness, without having to consider how we ought to *practice* it in our own relationships.

Let's set the stage a little, and I'll show you what I mean. Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests we try out this scenario:

"Say you have a lunch date with a friend that you go to a lot of trouble to keep. You leave early enough so that you will be there on time, and even though you have to circle the block five times to find parking place, you make it, choosing a nice table near the window and settling down to wait – and wait, and wait, and wait – until it becomes clear that you have been stood up, and you pay your check and leave, telling yourself that your friend had better have a good excuse.

Later that afternoon she calls, saying how stupid she feels, that she left her appointment book at home and did not remember until just that minute that the two of you had a lunch date. She is so sorry, she says; will you give her another chance?

You put your feelings aside. Of course you will; what is one missed lunch between friends? So you set another date, and the day arrives, and the whole thing happens all over again. Forgiving someone once is one thing, but are you really going to set another lunch date?" (*The Seeds of Heaven*, 92-93).

Which one is harder for you to do: to read about that Amish community forgiving that shooter and wrestle with what you believe about all of that, or to actually forgive your friend for standing you up again and set up a third lunch date?

You see what I mean. Forgiveness is hard.

This passage comes at the tail end of an entire section of Matthew's gospel in which Jesus is focused on instructing believers about how to be in community with one another, and he ends the section with a what he hopes will always have the final word: forgiveness.

Peter initiates the conversation: "Lord how many times must I forgive? Up to seven times?"

Peter thinks he's being magnanimous — and he is. Would you set up an eighth lunch date with your friend if he or she stood you up the previous *seven* times?

But what he's really asking is: "Jesus, when may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? What's the bottom line, here?"

Jesus says, "Not seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times." Or it might be seventy times seven — the Greek isn't all that clear — but, while the Greek isn't all that clear, the point is: *never*. You may *never* stop forgiving. Forgiveness is not a favor we provide seven times and withheld on the eighth. It is a way of life that *never* ends.

Sometimes, in order to drive his point home, Jesus likes to rely on hyperbole — on exaggerated speech. He likes to say it so that it's just so over-the-top that you can't help but get the point.

"Seven times, Jesus?"

"No, no. Try *seventy-seven* times." And if that is not over the top enough, he then tells what feels like a "tall tale" to try to drive the point home. It goes like this:

A king decides to settle old accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, he called in a slave that owed him *ten thousand talents*.

It might as well have been a zillion talents, the poor slave has no chance at paying the king back. So, in order to gain some of the restitution, the king decides to sell not only the slave, but also his wife and children. He knows it won't make a dent in what the slave owes him, but he's figured out that keeping the slave around is more expensive than cutting his losses. The slave, realizing the jig is up, begs with the king to be patient, and he'll pay him everything he owes.

It helps to know that a single talent is estimated to be worth anywhere from 6,000 to 10,000 denarii. One denarius was considered a single day's wage. So if we were to use the more conservative estimate of one talent equalling 6,000 denarii, then this slave owed his master 60,000,000 denarii. If he worked 40 hours a week for the next 150,000 years, he wouldn't yet have paid off the debt.

It's an impossible sum, and an impossible debt to clear — and yet, when the slave pleads with the king, the king has compassion on him and forgave the entirety of the debt. For reasons only the king knows, he cancels the debt and gives him back his life.

But within moments of having his own debts cancelled, the slave runs into another *who owes him*. His fellow slave owes him a hundred denarii, which is still a significant debt — but it's nothing compared to the *60 million* denarii he'd just been forgiven. And what does he do?

He seizes his fellow slave by the throat, pushes him up against the alley wall, and begins shaking him down. That's how I imagine the scene, any way. He demands the debt be paid. The fellow slave says to him exactly what he said to the king only moments earlier: "Be patient with me, and I *will* pay you!" But that promise wasn't good enough, and he had his fellow slave thrown in jail where he'd be left to rot until his debts had been repaid.

When the king caught wind of what the slave had done, the king did the same thing to him. He revoked his mercy and said, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. *Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had on you?*" (Matt. 18:32-33)?

You know, New Testament scholar, Dan Via, says that these parables of Jesus are like looking through the glass of a window. We look through the window, looking at the world outside. The window is clear, so we see through the window to the world. But then there comes that moment when, looking through the window, we catch a reflection of ourselves in the glass. And suddenly, the parable becomes a mirror, and we see ourselves in it.

Where do you see yourself in this parable, I wonder? The king who is owed a great deal, but forgives freely? Or the slave who is forgiven extravagantly, but refuses to forgive even a small fraction as much?

I want to suggest that there is really only one possible figure who could play the part of the king — and it's not you.

That's the benefit of Jesus' use of hyperbole. It helps us take note of what he wants us to learn. How can the slave who has been forgiven such a great debt, be so unforgiving with others?

Maybe because he missed the point. That's really the only explanation, isn't it?

I have been thinking about Peter's question and Jesus' answer... and Jesus' terrifying story all week; stewing on it; chewing on it; wrestling with it — and that's the only explanation I can reach: the slave had missed the point.

Maybe he thought he'd just gotten lucky, or that he'd outwitted the old king and pulled a fast one on him. Maybe he thought he'd just gotten away with it, and so *he missed his own forgiveness*. Otherwise, how could he have denied it to another?

And that's the point of Jesus' story.

It's not: do unto others or the king will do unto you. The point is: do unto others what the king has *already* done for you.

You see, the problem with Peter's question is the same temptation we still face. He wanted to know bare minimum requirement, because he was still trying to reduce the way of Jesus to following rules. "Give me the bottomline, Jesus. Give me the low bar that I know I have to reach."

You know, the great Christian mystics talk about our faith as a "journey toward union with God." But too often we have reduced this to a journey of sin avoidance, faithfulness in religious practices, and personal piety. *The Christian mystics talk about taking on the mind and heart of Christ.*

Peter was trying to establish the bare minimum as it related to forgiveness. And, in essence, Jesus answered by saying, "How much has God forgiven you? *That* is the new bare minimum. It is the only ledger that counts. Are you willing to forgive others as God has *already* forgiven you?"

You see?

Forgiveness is hard to preach about not only because it's hard *to do*, but also because it is the invitation to leave behind the journey of sin avoidance, in order to enter into the deeper and more mysterious journey of taking on the mind and heart of Christ — whose forgiveness knows no limitations.

In other words, even more than it is about someone else, forgiveness is about what is happening *in us*.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story:

"A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, 'Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?'

I answer her, 'I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself'" ("Letting Go of the Role of Victim," *Spirituality and Health*, Winter 1999, 34).

You see, this is why there is no limit to forgiveness. This is why forgiveness is not a favor we grant seven times and deny on the eighth. This is why it is something we must do again and again and again and again. This is why it is a way of life — because forgiveness isn't just about the one who is forgiven. It is also about how forgiveness sets free the one who offers it.

Martin Luther said it like this: "You can't help it if a bird lands on your head, but you don't have to let it build a nest."

Why carry that nest packed with baggage that is only hurting *you*, only causing *you* pain and resentment. Why not forgive?

It's the only way, sometimes, to keep that pesky bird from building a nest on your head.

Amen.