

Set Free
Matthew 18:21-35
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Sometimes the smallest acts in the world make the biggest difference in someone's life.

But sometimes those small acts that make such big differences are also the hardest to do.

If ever you've felt betrayed by someone you trusted, then you know what I'm talking about. How do you ever forgive that one?

Last week, I preached on how to fight like a Christian, and on Tuesday morning I went downstairs to say hi to the quilting group and to chat with them for a few minutes. And at some point, Sandy Boese pulled me aside and said, "Soooo, was last week's sermon because of the lectionary... or is there something happening in the church?" (I can always count on Sandy to ask what others wondering.)

The answer is that – whether big or small – there is *always* a fight happening in the church, always a disagreement, always a misstep, always someone saying or doing something that's hurting someone else. I've been at this awhile, and I can attest to that reality.

But Jesus never said, "Come, follow me, and we will all get along forever and ever. Amen." He never painted a picture of utopia. If anything, he said that following him would be the hardest thing you ever did – might require you to love your enemies, might require you to turn the other cheek, might require you to take up your cross, might even require you to forgive your fellow church members.

The *other half* of the answer to Sandy's questions is: Yes, it was the assigned text by the lectionary. I didn't pick that text because of some big conflict in the church that needs to be dealt with (at least not that I'm aware of...). In fact, I didn't pick that passage at all. The lectionary picked that passage and told me to preach it.

I've told you this before, but I think it's a good reminder: I preach from what's called the Revised Common Lectionary. It's 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 that *it* dictates rather than letting me default to my favorites. And, hopefully, that means it also provides *you* with a more robust scriptural diet than if I was simply relying on my personal favorites each week.

Take this week's passage, for example. If left to my own devices, I might never preach this passage.

Why? Because preaching about forgiveness is hard.

And doing it is even harder.

In one of his poems entitled *Mercy*, the poet, Rudy Francisco, writes:

She asks me to kill the spider.
Instead, I get the most
peaceful weapons I can find.

I take a cup and a napkin.
I catch the spider, put it outside
and allow it to walk away.

If I am ever caught in the wrong place
at the wrong time, just being alive
and not bothering anyone,

I hope I am greeted
with the same kind
of mercy.

It's a wonderful image, but forgiveness is different than that, because if you stand in need of forgiveness, then you weren't just "in the wrong place at the wrong time... not bothering anyone." If you stand in need of forgiveness, you did something — maybe unintentionally, maybe on purpose — but you did something that hurt someone, and so you need more than mercy. You need forgiveness.

But Peter's question isn't about *being* forgiven, is it? His question isn't, "Lord, how many times will *God* forgive *me*? Up to seven times?"

No, his question was, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should *I* forgive that one?" (Matt. 18:21).

The truth is, it's easier to *be* forgiven than it is to *do* the forgiving. What Peter wants to know is how often he's required to do the *hard* part.

"As many as seven times, Jesus?" Peter thinks he's being magnanimous — and he is. Traditional Jewish thought was that *three times* forgiving someone was adequate. Peter knows Jesus — knows that Jesus often exceeds the traditional teaching, so he more than doubles it. How about seven times, Jesus?

Jesus says, “Not just seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times.” Or it might be seven 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. The point is *unlimited* forgiveness.

There’s a story in the book of Genesis about a guy named Lamech. And in it, Lamech proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold on anyone who dares to attack him (Gen. 4:24).

Forgiveness then, as Jesus teaches it, is presented as the antonym of revenge. Followers of Jesus are expected to renounce the very human intention of getting even. We are called to be Lamech’s polar opposites (Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation, 216).

And to make his point about the vast difference between what we think is appropriate and what God thinks is appropriate, Jesus tells a parable:

A certain king, one day, decides to settle his accounts with all the servants and all the slaves of his kingdom. And when he begins reconciling his royal ledger, he discovered that one, single slave somehow owed him *ten thousand* talents.

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 equaling 6,000 denarii, then this slave owed the king 60,000,000 denarii — or 60,000,000 days of work. Do you know how many days are in the span of a long human life? Less than 30,000. His debt was so great that he would have to work everyday for 164,000 years to repay his debt.

It is an impossible sum, and an impossible debt to clear. *That* is the point.

But the man begs the king not to sell him or his wife or his children or his things. And the king relents. The NRSV says that the king had “pity” on him, but it’s the Greek word that also means “compassion.” The king had compassion for him. So the king forgave the entire 60,000,000 denarii debt. For reasons only the king knows, he decided to *set the slave free from his debt* and return his life to him.

But no sooner does he have his debts cancelled then he spots a fellow slave who owes him. He grabs the other man by the throat, pushes up against the alley wall, and starts to choke him. He demands the debt be paid. “Please, be patient with me, and I will pay you back!” It’s the exact same thing that he had just said to the king.

But he doesn’t forgive the man. He doesn’t extend even a fraction of the same kind of forgiveness to his fellow servant that was just extended to him. Instead, he has the man thrown in jail and left to rot.

When the king caught wind of what the slave had done, the king did the same thing to him. He revoked his forgiveness and said, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt

because you pleaded with me. *Should you not have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had on you?*" (Matt. 18:32-33).

The New Testament scholar, Dan Via, says that the 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, I wonder, do you see yourself in this parable?

The king who is owed greatly, but who forgives even more greatly? Or the slave who is forgiven extravagantly, but who can't even extend a small fraction as much to someone else?

Let me suggest there is only One who can play the part of the king, and it ain't you.

The truth is that we're all hypocrites when it comes to forgiveness. We will accept all the forgiveness that is offered to us, but struggle to extend even a fraction as much to others.

There's a phrase in psychology and philosophy called *performative contradiction* — and it means that what we say we believe and how we behave have a way of contradicting one another without our even being aware of it. It's the person who espouses the virtues of logic, but who reacts emotionally to every situation. It's the one who is most concerned about hospitality, but who never says hello to anyone. It's the one who is most convinced of God's grace, but who can't seem to forgive anyone.

With this parable, Jesus shines a spotlight at our performative contradiction: we are the community of the *forgiven*, but are we willing to *forgive* one another?

We all want to *be forgiven*. But the real work of forgiveness is to *be a forgiving person*.

William McRaven is a Navy SEAL Admiral who oversaw the Osama Bin Laden raid. While that mission was a success, not all missions were. In one, there were innocent Afghani casualties, and Admiral McRaven chose to ask forgiveness from the dad whose son was accidentally killed. He says:

"The mission was all a horrible misunderstanding and as tragic as it gets. We had inadvertently killed the man's son and maybe one of his daughters. I knew that I owed the family a sincere apology. Before I met with the father, I asked an Afghan general who worked for us how this man would respond if I asked for forgiveness. He said, 'He will absolutely forgive you, because it will not only relieve your burden, it will relieve his burden as well.'

The day came, there were about 200 Afghans packed into a long banquet hall, and I was one of only two Americans. The man looked heartbroken and another son was next to him, with hatred in his eyes. I stepped forward and said, 'I'm a soldier, but I also have children. I know how difficult this would be for me if this tragedy happened to my children.' Then I asked the man for forgiveness. As I watched him the hatred and tension began to lower. Finally, his son said to me, 'We accept your apology, and we will have no more hatred in our hearts for you.'"

Now, in that situation, which do you think was harder? To ask for forgiveness or to be the one forgiving?

Admiral McRaven says, "I don't know if I could have been as forgiving. I often say courage is the most important quality. It guarantees all the rest. But it is equally as difficult to forgive as it is to be courageous" (interview by Hugh Delchanty, *AARP Bulletin*, April 2023).

And as hard as it is to forgive someone you barely know, it's even harder to forgive someone you love.

Fred Rogers once said, "Forgiveness is a strange thing. It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than our friends. It can be hardest of all to forgive people we love."

Look around this room. There are people in here who are your friends. There are people in here whom you love. And it will be harder for you to forgive them than it will be to forgive the person who cuts you off in traffic or is rude to you at the store or says something hurtful about you at work.

What will you do when that fellow church member hurts you? How often will you forgive? Is three times enough? Five times? Seven times?

Leslie Clark says this: "I learned from a sister of the Benedictine Order that 'the prayer for God's presence in our life is evidence of God already present and working in us.' Maybe that's true for forgiveness, too."

I hope that's true, because if it is, then it means there is hope for me to become a more forgiving person; there is still hope for me to become more like Jesus.

There is one more thing that I think is worth mentioning about forgiveness, and it is this: sometimes we forgive someone else even if we know we will never be reconciled to that person again. And we forgive them, not because they need it, but because *we* do.

The 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 onto him. You're not hurting him by holding onto 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. And this is why God keeps forgiving us — 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 around on your head that nest packed with baggage that is only hurting *you*, only weighing *you* down, 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.