

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I FORGIVE?

Matthew 18:21-35

Dranesville UMC

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Although it's been a few years since we last had a children's sermon in our worship, most of us can remember them. Usually early in the order of worship, the pastor invites the younger children to come forward. Everyone sits around in a circle while the pastor has a short message. The message is often linked to the Scripture which will be the basis for the longer sermon. Sometimes there is interaction between the pastor and the children - a few questions may be asked and answered, for example. I have also noticed that adults pay far more attention during the children's sermon than to the later one intended for them.

The story is told about a children's sermon one Sunday in another congregation. After the children are seated around the pastor, he holds up a summer shirt that he often would wear around the house. The pastor tells the children that someone had told him this shirt was ugly and should be thrown away.

The pastor then said, "I'm having trouble forgiving the person who said those mean things. Do you think I should forgive that person?"

The pastor's six-year-old daughter raised her hand and said, "Yes, you should."

The pastor replied, "But why? This person hurt my feelings."

The daughter quickly replied, "Because you're married to her."
Out of the mouths of babes...

Wrestling with whether and how to forgive someone is often centered around something much more serious than words about an ugly old shirt. Each and every day, in all parts of the world, persons suffer all manner of wrongs and injustice, whether as individuals or as a society.

There is a great deal of unrest in this country about matters of racial injustice. There is certainly a place for repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It seems like many Americans aren't ready to go there yet. In the meantime, the hateful rhetoric, protests, senseless violence, and destruction continue. A number of opinion polls are showing that

many Americans are growing weary of the manner in which the issues are being lost amid the uproar to the point that interest in resolving the basic issues has waned considerably.

Last week, we looked at the verses immediately preceding today's Gospel Lesson in which Jesus describes the distinct process for accountability among church members; a process with forgiveness and reconciliation as the primary aims.

Following on the heels of this teaching, Peter asked questions that the other disciples may have been thinking: "If someone (assuming that someone is also a believer) repeatedly sins against me, how many times should I forgive that person? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

By the way, rabbis taught at the time that one need only forgive a repeated offense three times. Anything more than that is an indication that the repentance by the offender was not sincere. Peter must have thought his offer of seven times was more than generous.

Let's rephrase Peter's questions to get to what many of us might be wondering about this matter: "If another believer insults me repeatedly, must I go on suffering the indignity just because he always says, 'Sorry. My bad.'"? OR, taking another approach: "Is it in the best interest of the other believer for me to go on tolerating uncivil behavior when it's clear his repentance is superficial and he has no intention of changing?" Unfortunately, Jesus did not answer any of these questions. They were covered in the preceding verses about church discipline from last week. Instead, he drills down deeper concerning the matter of forgiveness. He will take it to another realm altogether.

Before going any further it's worth mentioning that the issue of forgiveness is certainly not unique to Christianity among the world's religions. Atheists have to struggle with it as well. What is unique about Christianity is the basis for forgiveness which drives our motivation and technique.

As is often the case, Peter has asked direct questions which Jesus will answer with a parable which may raise more questions than it answers. Let's take a look at this parable.

Some parables are allegories in which each character represents someone specific - God, sinners, religious leaders, believers. This parable is not one of them. We need to focus on the overall message without trying to take it so literally. Jesus gives us a clue to that effect when he begins by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like...". He didn't say, "The kingdom of heaven is...". He is using the parable to make a general comparison; not state a one-to-one correspondence.

This is also a thoroughly unbelievable story when we consider some of the circumstances. Let's try to keep all of this in mind as we make our way through it.

A king wants to settle his accounts, so he calls in a servant who owes him an outlandish amount of money. My Bible describes the amount as "ten thousand bags of gold." Other translations read, "ten thousand talents." This is an absolutely ridiculous amount of money. It's equal to the wages of a day laborer for 60,000,000 days or 165,000 years! To put this in context, the oldest fossil record of homo sapiens goes back 300,000 years.

At this point, we could get bogged down wondering how in the world this servant managed to accumulate that much debt. That's getting too far down in the weeds. We simply need to understand that the debt is far beyond what any individual could possibly repay; especially on short notice. In our parable, the absurdity continues, because that's exactly what the king expects - payment in full, NOW.

Knowing that the servant cannot possibly repay, the king decides on an alternative - another absurdity. He'll have the servant, his wife and children and his possessions sold in order to repay the debt. That couldn't come close to recouping the money owed. Let's not ignore the fact that the man is already a slave (Servant and slave are the same word in Greek.). How can he be sold into slavery twice? Once again, we need to back out and focus on trying to determine the point of the parable rather than focus on all these details.

There are some historical and cultural details you might find interesting. The king in the parable could not be Jewish. Jewish law prohibited the sale of one's wife and children to pay a man's debts. Many of the pagan kings had no such restrictions.

In this parable, as with many of his other teachings, Jesus used hyperbole to make his point. The exorbitant amount of money would be a clue to his listeners that the emphasis is on the overall message, not the details. This is similar to Jesus' teachings about cutting off one's offending hand or poking out a wandering eye to eliminate sin.

Jesus also used humor in ways that may go right by us. As we read the Gospels so seriously, when we come to a parable like this, it's hard to imagine his First Century audience. They would have been amused by a slave who manages to get in so much debt and a king who would go from being a demanding ruler to an amazingly generous one back to being demanding in very short order. This parable may have been met with quite a few chuckles. And that's OK. Most of us remember jokes and funny stories longer than long dry lectures. It could be that the part of this sermon you remember the longest may be the earlier story about the children's sermon.

Back to the parable - Things become even more unbelievable. The servant pleads for more time and promises to repay in full. If he couldn't pay in the first place, where will he get the money now? Again, let's focus on the action in general. The servant is desperate.

Next thing you know, the king decides to forgive the servant the entire debt - just like that. This entire, enormous debt - gone. One would think the servant would have been so grateful and would have celebrated his good fortune and escape from bondage. That's not what happened.

Jesus said that, when the servant was leaving the king's presence, with this message of debt forgiveness still ringing in his ears, he encounters another servant who owes him some money. He has a wonderful opportunity to show someone else the mercy he has just been shown.

That's not what happens. The newly-forgiven servant grabs his debtor by the throat, chokes him and demands that he repay what is owed, or else. The amount in question is equal to the wages of a laborer for 20 days. This is not even pocket change compared to the first debt - 165,000 years' wages vs 20 days!

The second servant uses almost the same words as the first servant did with the king when he begs for more time in order to repay the debt in full. The forgiven servant will have none of that. He orders his debtor thrown into prison until he could repay. Here's the irony - prisoners in debtors' prison didn't earn money. Inmates in our penal system have the opportunity to earn small amounts of money for work done, but not prisoners in Jesus' time. Unless one had assets to sell or family members paid the debt, the servant was looking at a life sentence.

Word of the forgiven servant's actions gets back to the king by way of some of the other servants who were outraged by the injustice done to the second servant. The king revokes his forgiveness of the debt and orders the man to be subject to the torturers until he can pay his debt; which, of course, he will never be able to do.

The parable ends with Jesus saying, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." While we don't need to take every word of the parable literally, we certainly need to pay attention to these words! This isn't the first time Jesus said something like this in the Gospel of Matthew. In Chapter Six, when Jesus is teaching the disciples to pray what we know as The Lord's Prayer, he teaches them to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Forgiveness by God is linked to our forgiveness of others. That's a sobering thought. We are called to forgive generously without keeping score. Judgment awaits those who refuse to forgive. Let's consider some of the other implications of this teaching.

We can't earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others; but we might impede it if we don't.

Forgiveness is the very opposite of revenge. Jesus calls us to renounce the human intention and inclination to get even with someone who repeatedly injures us. This parable provides the theological basis.

Jesus didn't lay a burden on his disciples that he was unwilling to shoulder. Imagine, if you will, that Jesus had been more like some of us when he was crucified. I can almost hear him saying, "You have no idea who you're messing with. I will get to the bottom of this and someone is going to pay - big time!" We know that's not what he said - not even close. Instead, the Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

Here are some other thoughts about forgiveness:

We must frequently pray for the strength to resist the temptation to get even with those who hurt us and for grace to reflect the generosity of the kingdom of heaven. That may not be easy. Jesus never said it would be.

Unlimited forgiveness should not be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior. Some of us may be guilty of forgiving too much and too quickly. Premature forgiveness may be an easy way out that does little to help the offender or heal the relationship. One good example is physical abuse. Many well-meaning clergy have been guilty of encouraging persons, particularly battered women, to remain in dangerous situations and simply forgive the abuser. We've become smarter over the years. Now clergy are directed to help the victim leave the dangerous situation so the abuser can get the help, which may include incarceration, that is needed.

This brings us to the point that, while forgiveness means to let go, it doesn't mean to deny the hurt. To forgive is not necessarily to forget. Some events and situations should never be forgotten - the Holocaust, slavery, infidelity of a spouse. You may think of others.

Generally speaking, offenses should be confronted in a spirit of gentleness. We need to remember how each of us has been forgiven.

Sometimes we don't want to forgive; even though we know we should. We may want revenge; to invert the Golden Rule. Maybe we resist because we're waiting for the other party to do or say something to indicate their awareness of the wrong they have done. We may resist forgiving out of stubborn pride.

Forgiveness involves a combination of mercy and grace. Although often thought of as synonymous they are different. Mercy is not giving a person what he deserves. Grace is giving a person what he doesn't deserve.

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It's widely known that unforgiveness, holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply affects our emotional and physical health. Unwillingness to forgive can affect an entire community. Withholding forgiveness, holding a grudge, causes more harm to us than the person we are called to forgive. I've heard it said that carrying a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping that the other person will die.

Forgiveness is essentially one-sided. It may lead to reconciliation or restoration; but it may not. Vivian Malone, a young black woman, enrolled as a student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in 1963. Federal troops helped ensure her entrance into the school, but Governor George Wallace tried to block her way. When he failed, Malone became the first African-American student to graduate from the University of Alabama.

Years later, Governor Wallace was taken in his wheelchair to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where he asked black people to forgive him for his racism, bigotry, and specifically his ill-treatment of Vivian Malone. He asked Malone for forgiveness. She said she had forgiven the governor years before.

When asked why she had done that, Malone said, "I'm a Christian, and I grew up in the church. I was taught that we are all equal in the eyes of God. I was also taught that you forgive people, no matter what. And that was why I had to do it. I didn't feel as if I had a choice."

I'd like to end by giving us all some homework. If you are able, think of someone you need to forgive. There may be someone you have harbored a grudge against for years. It could be this bitterness is eating you up. That's plenty of reason to forgive that person. Forgive them so they no longer have the power to live in your head and make you bitter and angry. Forgive them, as much for your sake as theirs. We forgive, remembering the words, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Amen.