

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

The Christian Birthmark

A sermon preached September 14, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Matthew 18:21 - 19:1 ²¹ 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?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The song says,

*You gotta sing like you don't need the money,
You gotta love like you'll never get hurt,
You gotta dance like nobody's watchin',
It's gotta come from the heart if you want it to work.*

And Jesus says you've got to forgive from the heart if your Christian life is going to work. I wish I could count how many times I've heard people say (and how many times I've told myself), "Well, I know I'm *supposed* to forgive..." and then allowed that nod in the direction of grace as warrant for proceeding no further down the path to reconciliation and freedom from the pains of the past.

How hard it is to connect the *supposed to forgive* with a genuine change of heart. The heart has its own code that our heads can't always decrypt when the clear command to forgive bumps up against the surging need for vindication. The mind knows what our faith teaches, but the heart knows how deeply angry, wounded, and spiteful we are feeling. We end up making a desultory nod in Jesus' general direction because we know there is little likelihood of the heart's

going along with the plan. But, as the song clearly implies, this ain't goin' to work.

Forgiveness is like a circle – it is either perfect, with all points on the radius equidistant from the center, or it fails being a circle. An ellipse is not a circle; an oval is not a circle. Either geometric figure may look pleasing to the eye in a given circumstance, just as some other attitudes of the heart may satisfy us with a semblance of reconciliation, but it's still not forgiveness. A feint toward forgiveness for appearance sake, or for the sake of fooling ourselves is spiritual subterfuge. It may leave us likeable and sociable, but nonetheless unredeemed. We end up looking like James Macpherson's characterization of Lord Arlington in his *History of Great Britain*: "The deficiency of his integrity was forgiven in the decency of his dishonesty."

Forgiveness is either total or it is something else. It is either at the root of our being, at the very heart of who we are as Christian persons, or it is inauthentic. In that battle between the mind that knows what we are called to do and the heart that wants to indulge its wrath in the midst of woundedness, we pretend at forgiveness, we meter it out in small pieces, we make it conditional and exceptional because what the heart wants most of all is vengeance. Forgiving a little bit is the bone we throw to the demands of our faith. We may fool ourselves, but remain fixed somewhere in the past where the offense still smarts. No one is free to move into a gracious future when some unforgiven slight of the past keeps them prisoner.

Brad Braxton tells about two men talking about their marriages. One man said, "My wife and I argue a lot, and every time we argue she gets *historical*. His friend interrupted him, "You meant to say that she gets *hysterical*, didn't you?" The first man says, "No, she gets *historical*. She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me." As Desmond Tutu said at the time of the peace and reconciliation process in South Africa, "Without forgiveness, there can be no future."

The problem of forgiveness is addressed often in scripture. At some points forgiveness is described as a kind of transaction; we are called to forgive as God has forgiven us. "Forgive us our debts / trespasses / sins as we forgive those who are debtors / trespassers / sinners against us," we pray. That sounds benign; it suddenly takes on a dangerous edge in today's parable, "And in anger his lord handed *him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*"

This story that Jesus tells is full of hyperbole, and those of us who struggle to be authentic in our forgiving one another – which includes every one of us – needs to hope that this threat is exaggerated to drive home a point. God's character, we know in faith, cannot desire harm to us, for God's very nature is grace and compassion and God's whole desire is for our redemption, not our condemnation. And yet, there is cost – considerable and painful cost – when our attempts at forgiveness are mere salutes from the head and not commitments from the heart where our feelings are so clear and often so raw.

The word translated *forgive* in scripture simply means “to let go,” or “to set aside.” An elderly woman I knew in a former congregation was seriously injured in a rainstorm when a powerful gust of wind filled her umbrella. Had she only let go of the umbrella’s handle, she would have found herself wetted but not dragged down to the hard concrete sidewalk suffering a broken hip and lacerations. We don’t know how to let go, and the emotional storms of interpersonal conflict and rising desires of vengeance that we would cling to out of vaunted senses of affront damage us and cripple us.

Peter asked Jesus how many times it is necessary to forgive. It’s a good question if one assumes that forgiveness is a choice and not a necessity. If forgiveness is like a switch that can be turned on or off or an implement that you scrounge out of your toolbox on the rare occasions you need it to make an adjustment. Jesus’ answer, you see, comes out of an entirely different understanding. His retort to Peter is based on an understanding of forgiveness as a state of being, as a fundamental aspect of what it means to live a human life, and as a profound understanding of the very nature of God. Just as God has not set a limit on grace, neither should we. As John Oman put it, “Grace is grace precisely because, though wholly concerned with moral goodness, it does not at all depend on how moral we are.”

Jesus’ answer to Peter is theological, not anthropological. That is, he frames his answer based on God’s nature, not ours. And though it may not be apparent at a casual reading, Jesus and Peter are discussing scripture. In Genesis, chapter 4, verses 23 and 24, a character named Lamech boasts, “*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*” Lamech is the saint of the disproportional response: you wound me, I kill you; you avenge yourself seven times, I avenge myself seventy-seven times. You bomb our building, I lay waste your nation.

The parable Jesus tells is the complete antithesis of Lamech’s vengeance. Rejecting any weak understanding of forgiveness as a kind of mathematical balance sheet issue, Jesus – it is so like him! – denies us the satisfaction of revenge, removes the prospects of retribution, and refuses our claim to the privilege of justifying our wrath as though we have some sort of spiritual second amendment bill of rights to bear punitive arms against others in self-defense.

Jesus also removes these matters that we prefer to treat as personal, individual, or tribal and places them into the context of community. Remember the details of the parable. There was this king who wanted to settle accounts, and a slave who owed him 10,000 talents. This is an astounding sum. According to ancient Roman records, in the year 4 BCE in Judea, they collected a total of 600 talents in taxes. That’s from the whole populace. 10,000 talents would be greater than the gross domestic product of many countries today. It would equal approximately 200,000 years of work for the typical laborer of that day.

So, here is this pathetically indebted slave being forgiven his incalculably vast personal debt going out and shaking down his peers for the paltry amounts they owe him, and, again, to put things in scale, 100 denarii represents about

three months wages for a laborer in Jesus' day. Four months instead of 200,000 years – who wouldn't like those mortgage terms?

This parable depends on these exaggerated differences to make several points. The most obvious is the contrast between the “endless, unimaginable plurality of forgiveness” [James Boyce] on the part of God and the black hole smallness of the forgiven slave. A second becomes more obvious when this passage is returned to its place in Matthew's gospel, which in this section is all about the community life of the church. That is, this parable is not simply about God's relationship to the slave or any one of us, nor the slave's individual relationship to any other slave he demanded payment from. It is about the quality of life in community. It is about the incredible damage done to all by virtue of the gracelessness of one. It is about our failure to connect our dependency upon God's forgiveness of us with our responsibility to maintain the integrity of the community by living in forgiveness with one another.

But the matter remains so incredibly hard. Terrible things are done to us and to those we love. We, likewise, do terrible things to others and cannot find a way to go back and amend what we have done. Poet and hymn writer Gracia Grindal confesses for all of us, that “the conclusion of the parable, that we must forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart, is too much for me... I have learned in my life that I do not always have it in my heart to do what is required here. For many of us, the only solution is to get a new heart.”

But spiritual heart transplants are no light thing. There was the member of a former church who called me at two in the morning, sobbing, telling me she had just learned that her husband had been sexually abusing her daughter; there was the retired couple who had entrusted their life savings to an investment counselor who had stolen it all; there was the couple who, in back-to-back conversations expressed their rage at the other for the affairs they were having; there was the woman who could not get over her sense that her mother always resented her; there was the returned soldier who was tortured by memories of killing; there were the parents who made sure that the man who murdered their son would never get paroled; there was the researcher whose countless hours of discovery were claimed by his professor in a well-received presentation; there was the woman in a former church whose son was lost when that flight was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland....

From the tragic to the paltry, from the slight to the catastrophic we are tortured by our trespasses and our being trespassed against. The problem is not that the past is gone; it is that in painful pieces it remains so tragically alive to us. And especially in the face of the deeply tragic and profoundly malicious, how indeed can we be expected to forgive? We live in a society that seems to thrive on the spirit of blame and revenge; how can we extricate ourselves from the hopelessness of that? And where is justice in these stories? Where is satisfaction?

At least in part, the answer is that it is not in our hands to correct or to amend. In part the answer is that we will live or die within our commitments, and if our commitment is to vengefulness, we will live confined within that ethic. And we will never know when one tooth will have satisfied the loss of another, or

when one eye will have satisfied the tragic loss of the first eye, and the seventy-times-seven principle of retribution will keep the descendants of Lamech literally locked in a relentless descent through an unredeemed history.

O Lord, teach us how to forgive, because we find it so hard, because we don't know the way, because we are shackled to a past darkened with shades of pain over the way we have been treated and the ways we have treated others. Forgiveness is a way of living. It is a way of being. It is the refusal to keep lists, it is the discipline to let God be God and not claim God's privilege to judge. It is a commitment to the harmony of the community, a hunger for the dawn of new realities. It is confidence in the promises of God. It is humility and the knowledge of personal responsibility.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We are not called to lobotomize our brains. Really terrible things happen. Evil deeds are done. Are we called to do nothing, feel nothing, to act as though all is well? No, we are called to protect the vulnerable and weak. We are called to console the suffering and wounded. We are called to defend the dignity and worth of the other. We are called to fight evil. And we are called to "holy remembering" where alongside our griefs we remember the grief of God at the cross where forgiveness was spoken, and remember the grace whereby our own sins are forgiven, and remember the call to forgive before we remember our rage to retaliate.

The call to forgiveness is the call into the future, and always the question comes, "What kind of future?" Will it be a Jesus future or a Lamech future? Will it be one which laments the past and then sets it aside, or will it be one in which all the wrath of former days shall be repeated endlessly in future days? I am struck with Golda Meir's comment from long ago in the context of the apparently endless conflict in the Middle East: "I can forgive the Arabs for killing my son, but I cannot forgive the Arabs for teaching my son to kill Arabs."

That is the lament at the heart of all issues of hurt and forgiveness: what kind of future can we have as individuals, as a community, as a nation or world if we remain prisoners of the past?