

A MUCH-NEEDED CONVERSATION
Exodus 14: 19-31 and Matthew 18: 21-35
September 13, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

In his book, *Letters to Malcolm*, C.S. Lewis writes these words, "Last week in prayer, I discovered, or at least I think I did, that I suddenly was able to forgive someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years."

Lewis' words comfort me as I try to preach on forgiveness this morning. In my own life, I find forgiving to be a struggle at times. Many years ago, another pastor tried to torpedo my ministry. I suspected as much and as non-confrontational as I am, it took a while for me to approach him. But I did and he confessed that that was exactly what he was doing. He was trying to pull the church out of the denomination, and he considered me a threat to his agenda. He offered no apologies for his words or actions. But, as his own ministry crumbled and as he was taking the church down, I had to say to him--for my own peace of mind--"I forgive you." The Spirit, resting so heavy on my heart was not going to let me do any less. In this situation, and in other ones where I struggle, I have learned that with the help of the Lord, I can live out forgiveness.

If you and I don't get this forgiveness thing down, then we miss the point of this parable because God's good news in Jesus Christ, God's undeserved grace, and the very heart of God are wrapped up in forgiveness. There is no greater text in all of Scripture that opens God's heart of forgiveness to you and me than this parable of the Unforgiving Servant. There is a universal longing, a hunger in the human soul for forgiveness; both to be able to give it, and to receive it.

Ernest Hemingway tells about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the newspaper, 'Paco, meet me Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.' It seems Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and so when the father gets to the hotel, he finds eight hundred young men waiting for their fathers. Humorous on one hand. Tragic on the other.

If we long for forgiveness...to give and receive...then why is it so hard to do? It was not any easier for the first followers of Jesus. Not even for the disciples. Peter, speaking as the spokesperson for the disciples, steps forward and lays the difficulty of forgiveness right there at the feet of Jesus, asking how many times do I have to forgive before I can stop? Seven times?

Peter did not just pick that number out of the air. He is trying to hedge his bets with this forgiveness business because the Rabbinic teaching of that day said that when someone wronged you, you should forgive up to three times, and then you could stop forgiving. So, to be on the safe side, or maybe on the pious side, Peter doubles that and adds one more for good measure and says, 'Should I forgive him seven times, Lord?' Jesus' answer: No! 7 x 70!

So, if we do the math, after 490 times we can stop forgiving? Apparently, that is what one husband thought, trying to follow Jesus' commandment. At home, he kept a board going with tally marks and made sure he kept track of the forgiveness he had offered. Every time his wife

did something that annoyed him, he would walk over to the board, pick up the chalk, look at his wife, say, "I forgive you," and then make a little mark. He counted carefully because he knew he had to forgive 490 times and after that...watch out!

We know that Jesus is not talking about a number. He is talking about how grace is to be lived out in the life of a believer when it comes to forgiveness.

If we try to understand grace, which is that beating pulse of forgiveness, by dissecting the law, we are going to miss it. Grace is best understood by story, by experience. I am not sure there is a greater feeling than knowing when you have wronged someone, they have the gift to forgive and to keep loving. I have been on the receiving end and it is humbling.

Jesus explains the grace of forgiveness by telling a simple, clear story about how citizens of heaven are to behave when it comes to forgiving. I am going to give these characters names, King Andrew, his servant, Michael, and another servant named Jeremy. Listen for the Word of the Lord again.

King Andrew has loaned Michael some money, and now he is decided to call in the loan. Pay-back time. Michael has run up an incredible tab. In today's market, it is over 10 million dollars. On Michael's salary, he will not live long enough to pay that back. So, King Andrew, businessman that he is, decides to cut his losses by selling Michael and his whole family into slavery and then everything they own up for auction. He will not recoup 10 million, but he will get something.

Buying some time and hoping the king will cut him some slack, Michael begs for mercy. He pleads for his life and the lives of his family. Then the most unexpected, unbelievable thing happens. King Andrew does not just give him time, does not just cut him some slack, he totally forgives the debt. Michael's family remains intact and free from slavery and their belongings taken off the auction block. Free and forgiven...debt and debtor.

Put yourself in Michael's shoes. How would you be feeling at that moment? What would you do? Well, here is the sticky-wicket: After all that forgiveness, we find out that Michael leaves as if nothing happened.

Michael hops on the bus and low and behold there sits Jeremy and a handful of other riders. The moment awkward because Jeremy owes Michael less than \$5 and Michael thinking, you know...the money you spent on this bus fare, instead of walking home, would get me my money back. So angry, he gets out of control and actually puts Jeremy in a strangle hold right in front of everyone. Jeremy begins pleading for his life, even using the same words that Michael has uttered to King Andrew. Thank goodness Andrew does not snuff out Jeremy's life, but he also is not willing to forgive the \$5 debt. All of that pleading and Jeremy still finds himself imprisoned until he can pay back the debt.

But remember there have been witnesses and they are so furious with what has just transpired, they run to King Andrew with the news and Michael finds himself called back to the royal rug and held accountable for his actions. No longer Mr. Nice Guy and totally ticked off, the sends Michael to his new home away from home...debtors' prison.

End of story...not quite. It gets a bit uncomfortable because now Jesus is messing with us. His words: Unless you and I forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart, we are going wind up just like Michael. The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

True story: In 1935, Mayor La Guardia of New York, visited a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He relieved the judge for the evening and took the bench himself. A case came up where a grandmother had been arrested for stealing bread to feed her grandchildren. La Guardia said, 'You are guilty, and I have got to punish you. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.'

And then LaGuardia himself pulled out a 10 dollar bill out of his pocket and threw it in his hat. And then he fined everybody in the courtroom for living in a city where grandmothers have to steal bread to feed their grandchildren. They passed the hat and that woman left the courthouse that evening. She left not only with her fine totally paid, but with 47 dollars and 50 cents in her pocket.

Now do not you think it is more likely that she left that courtroom in a spirit of forgiveness; a greater probability that she would show mercy to those she met?

Friends, you, and I are going to get stung in our lives many times, by many people who do not get forgiveness. People are going to do us wrong. Some of them are going to come to us and ask us to forgive them; and some of them are going to be pretty awful people who have done some pretty awful things to us. Many of them many not deserve to be forgiven. So, you and I as Christians are always confronted with the choice. Am I going to seize on the pain? Am I going to seize on the pride, and withhold forgiveness? If so, Jesus says you and I are just like Michael, and we are going to wind up in prison. Prisons of anger and hatred and depression and guilt that we build for ourselves.

We know this is a story about us and our relationship with God and each other in terms of forgiveness. God has forgiven the debt that you and I have run up! And nothing we can do will ever scratch the surface of paying off that debt. Yet God, through grace, unconditional, unending love cancelled it totally and we received the gift of everlasting life. We know all of this. On our own, forgiveness is hard. But with God's help and God's grace, through Jesus Christ, our debt was, is and will ever be forgiven. And the truth of the gospel is this: Through prayer, talking to and listening for God's word to us, we can ask to receive and give forgiveness. It is a much-needed conversation.

Through the power of prayer, like C. S. Lewis, may we be able to say: I discovered, or at least I think I did, that I suddenly was able to forgive someone. Amen