

## THE FORGIVENESS FILE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
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The Psalmist declared, *The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. (Psalm 103:8)*

Years ago at one of the parishes I served before coming to Grace Church, a key program staff position came open. The Vestry and I wanted to get this one right, so we formed a search committee, interviewed applicants, checked references, and finally called an out-of-state candidate whom we believed to be the ideal person for the job. The man accepted our offer, resigned the position he currently held, bought a house near the church, and went to work. He immediately brought enormous gifts and abilities to the task at hand, but strangely, his achievements always came at a high price. Some would even call it a body count. His abrupt, demanding, uncompromising personality created hostile reactions in the church, the community, even the diocese.

For two exhausting years I stood between the parish and the staff member, trying to interpret one to the other. Finally, just when things were settling down and beginning to work, he resigned with little warning to take a position elsewhere. Later on we discovered that when he cleaned out his office, it seemed that he took with him some church-owned resources. In the end I was not sorry to see him go, but inwardly I seethed over the lost energy that I and many people had poured into this guy. I vowed that I would blast him out of the water if any potential employer of his ever called me for a reference.

One evening not much later I was in my study at home repurposing a stack of manila file folders. It was my own little green initiative to help save the planet. Why throw these perfectly good folders away when, by adding a blank address label to the tab, I could use them again to file something else. I was far enough along in my preaching career to know that certain annoying themes in the Scriptures kept coming up again and again, so my plan was to begin building a war chest of thoughts and illustrations for each one of them. I would have a file on every conceivable preaching topic to avoid being caught flat-footed when it was time to write a sermon. One of those annoying, inescapable themes in the Scriptures is forgiveness. Yes, I would need a file on forgiveness. I reached for a previously used folder, put the white address label on it, and began writing FORGIVENESS on the tab. As I wrote I could see through the label what the folder used to be. I was writing FORGIVENESS over the name of the former staff member for whom I still harbored resentment. Call it God's sense of humor, if you like. I realized that the file folder itself would illustrate much of what needs to be said about forgiveness.

Peter once asked a question of Jesus that we heard in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-35): "*Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*" Some Biblical scholars speculate that the context for Peter's question might have been the time on the Jewish calendar known as the ten days of Awe, the period between and including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur was the Day of Atonement, and the Jews knew that it wouldn't work to seek God's forgiveness if they were still harboring personal resentments of their own. Therefore, a special task of the ten days of Awe was reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> It was to chip away at any ugly bitterness between them by asking for and granting forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*. Hendrickson, 1998, p. 124.

They couldn't be right with God until they were right with each other. We can hear echoes of the practice in the Lord's Prayer, when we pray, *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. In any case, Jesus replied to Peter: "*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*" Older translations render the number as seventy times seven, but it's clear that Jesus didn't mean 490 or 77. What he meant to convey was forgiveness without end.

Unlimited forgiveness is a difficult concept to fathom, so Jesus gave Peter and us an illustration to put in our files. He told the well-known parable of the king who forgave his servant a debt of ten-thousand talents. In today's terms, based on an hourly wage of \$15, ten-thousand talents would be the equivalent of four billion, six-hundred eighty million dollars. We wonder how a lowly servant might have racked up such a debt, but to hang too many theories on this one detail is to obscure the parable's meaning. The point of the absurdly large number is that it was unpayable. Augustine believed that the ten-thousand talents stood for the Ten Commandments of the law. Just as the servant could never pay back the king, neither can we ever find atonement with God through the law. What happens? The king forgives the servant his unpayable debt. The king writes FORGIVENESS over the name of the servant on the file the auditors were keeping on him.

We heard a similar act of outrageous forgiveness in today's reading from Genesis (50:15-21). Joseph's brothers, out of envy and spite, had faked his death and sold him into Egyptian slavery. For a mere twenty shekels of silver they destroyed their family and plunged their father into inconsolable grief. But Joseph, by virtue of God's providence and his own ability to interpret dreams, rose to prominence in Egyptian society. In today's reading we heard how Joseph's brothers came before him begging to be forgiven for all the wrong they had done to him. What happened? Joseph wrote forgiveness over each one of their names. The message of today's Scripture readings could not be more obvious. It is the call to practice forgiveness: to grant it, and to ask for it.

Now then, most of us would agree that forgiveness is a good thing, and that the world would be a better place if we were all to be more diligent about putting it into practice. Indeed, this is the part of the sermon when you are expecting me to tell you that you should be a more forgiving person. How do preachers put it? We must forgive. We should forgive. Here's the most tired old phrase: we are called to forgive. So now I should give you a plan for how to become a better forgiver, right? Well, it was the boxer Mike Tyson who was famously quoted as saying, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Likewise, the theologian C.S. Lewis said, "Forgiveness is a beautiful thing until you have something to forgive." It's no secret that we all have a hard time forgiving: high and low, rich and poor, one and another. We prove to be unworthy transmitters of God's grace.

Witness the servant in the parable Jesus told. One would think that being forgiven a multi-billion dollar debt would soften him towards his peers. But no, he turns right around, accosts a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii, and demands immediate payment. 100 denarii would be about \$12,000 today. To be sure, it's real money, but it's payable. And compared to \$4.6 billion, it's laughable. The servant's reaction is just not what we would expect. Sometimes gift-giving backfires. I remember a freezing winter day when a homeless man in bare feet rang the parish house bell, asking for shoes. As it happened, I had a brand new pair of sneakers that were the wrong size for me, but perfect for the man. Rather than taking them back to the store, I gave them to him. He put them on gratefully and went on his way. Ten minutes later the bell rang again, and there was the man, screaming profanities at the top of his voice. The language he used would have made a sailor blush. In his rage he was demanding that we not pity him. Somehow, receiving the gift wounded his pride, and it made him furious. It was not the reaction I was expecting to the gift.

I read recently how Dwight Eisenhower, the 34<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, had difficulty forgiving. Whenever someone especially wronged him, his practice was to write that person's name on a piece of paper, drop it into a bottom drawer, and say to himself, "that finishes the incident, and as far as I'm concerned, that person." He went on to say that over the years the drawer became "a sort of private wastebasket for crumpled up spite and discarded personalities."<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower's practice sounds petty, but it could be that he was merely doing outwardly what many people do inwardly: accumulating the grudges they haven't been able to release. And still we wonder: why is it difficult for us to keep God's grace and forgiveness moving along?

Speaking of moving along, did you happen to see the article in *The New York Times* this week about the London sewer system? Apparently, a major waste disposal line under the Whitechapel neighborhood is blocked by something called a fatberg. A fatberg is formed in a sewer line when restaurants dispose of cooking oil down the drain. The cooking oil congeals with all the paper products and everything else that gets flushed down the toilet. Over time it hardens to the consistency of concrete and grows with every flush. The Whitechapel fatberg is now 600-foot long and weighs 140 tons. The only way to clear the line is for sewer workers to descend into the depths and attack the fatberg with high pressure jet hoses and power tools. It's going to take them three weeks to do it. Days of awe, indeed. They report that even more overpowering than the fatberg's size is its smell. Even still, the Museum of London wants to preserve a slice of it for their archives.

Forgive the nasty, unconventional illustration (we are, after all, talking about forgiveness). But the fatberg is a metaphor of sin and death. It is the greasy accumulation of waste, and grief, and grudges that builds up in our soul and prevents us from being worthy transmitters of God's grace. How do we clear the lines? How can we become better at forgiving our brothers and sisters, to say nothing of loving our enemies? I have no tricks or techniques to offer you today. Far be it from me to give you a plan. All I can do is commend to you these high pressure readings, powered by the Spirit of God. Let them go to work on you. I can tell you that the parable attacks the gunk in my soul merely by reminding me of God's vast and inexhaustible supply of grace and love. The king forgave the servant a debt he could never repay. If God is keeping a file on you and me, the word FORGIVEN is already written across our names. The Psalmist (103) would sing: *For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is God's mercy great upon those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us.*

The parable goes to work on me by exposing my own unforgiving nature, especially in comparison with God's abundant forgiveness. Whenever I read the end of the story, and hear the king condemn the unmerciful servant to be tortured debtor's prison, I happily respond "Thanks be to God." The villain gets what he deserves. The king should have sent him there in the first place. Oops, such thoughts make me just like the unforgiving servant. I have no stones to throw at him. The parable goes to work on my soul by suggesting that the one who suffers most in the end is the one who doesn't forgive. Carrying gripes and grudges through life is exhausting. We condemn ourselves to be tortured when we allow them to accumulate in the file cabinets and archives of conscious memory.

Finally, the reading from Genesis goes to work on me when I hear Joseph's discerning God's ability to work his good purposes even out of the brothers' evil intentions. "*Even though you intended to harm to me,*" he said to his brothers, "*God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*" It is a staggering notion, and not a little disturbing, to consider that God is deeply hidden in the dark places of human nature, even there

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew F. Holland, *Eisenhower Between the Wars*. Greenwood Publishers, 2001, p. 32.

directing all things toward his good purposes. St. Paul would write to the Romans (8:28), *All things work together for good to those who love God*. So it is that these readings can go to work on our souls like a power tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Even still, it will take time.

I still have my forgiveness file at home, filled with more thoughts and illustrations than you can bear today. But the story of the file is actually better than all the stories in it. Whenever I take it out I think of my former colleague whose name is still visible beneath the label. It would be stretching things to say that we came to a great moment of reconciliation, but after a certain cooling-off period, during which I examined my own role in what went wrong, I began to wish him all good things. And when the time did come for a future employer to call for a reference, I was able to speak what I hope were words of grace and truth. I know he got the job and flourished in it for many years.

When my hand wrote FORGIVENESS over the name of a brother in Christ, I like to think that I paid attention to God's sense of humor. I like to think that I got the joke, so that I can walk as a child of the light, and sing with the Psalmist: *The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness*.

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