

TO FORGIVE OR NOT TO FORGIVE?

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Grace Church in New York
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*And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.
(Matthew 18:27)*

Once upon a time a new rector climbed into the pulpit to deliver his inaugural sermon. He decided to dispense with the pleasantries and instead preach a challenging, stimulating, even gutsy sermon about a most unpopular topic: tithing. With passion, eloquence, and humor he appealed to the Biblical practice of setting aside ten-percent of one's income for the church. The congregation was riveted throughout the sermon, and after the service they were eager to congratulate the rector on his thought-provoking message. Some were even found to be discussing the sermon over Sunday brunch.

The next Sunday the church was more crowded than usual, as the word about town was that the new rector was actually worth hearing. For his second sermon he preached a challenging, stimulating, even gutsy sermon about a most unpopular topic: tithing. In fact, those who had been there the week before were fairly certain it was exactly the same sermon, word for word. Most assumed the difficulties of the move had simply made a new sermon impossible that week. And some even found themselves discussing the sermon a second time over Sunday brunch.

On the new rector's third, fourth, and fifth Sundays in the pulpit he preached his exact same tithing sermon again and again and again, word for word. After the sixth Sunday of the same sermon, no one was discussing it over Sunday brunch anymore. They were calling the senior warden to complain. Their cry went up, "how long?" Finally the vestry intervened, inquiring of the new rector how they might encourage him to move on to another topic – nice though the tithing sermon was. "The answer is simple," replied the rector. "For six weeks I've preached about tithing, and to the best of my knowledge no one has become a tither. I'll stop preaching about it when you start doing it."

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is about something even more difficult to give than ten-percent of your income. So this will be a challenging, hopefully stimulating, even gutsy sermon about a most unpopular topic: forgiveness. Most of us would acknowledge that forgiveness is closely connected to the Christian faith. We might admit that the world could use a good bit more of it, and from time to time when the preacher runs it up the flagpole we all salute. Forgiveness is a good thing. Why can't we leave it there and move on? Well, we have to keep talking about it because we have so much trouble doing it.

Apparently, the disciple Peter was having trouble forgiving. Someone must have repeatedly hurt or disappointed him, and he was finding it impossible to consider that person worthy again of trust and respect, to say nothing of good wishes. So he asked a question of Jesus: "Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 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.

Peter must have looked confused, so Jesus told a parable to illustrate his point. A certain king wanted to settle some accounts and noticed that one servant owed him 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. What did the king do? Out of pity for the servant the king released him and forgave him the debt. In the Gospels, the Greek word that we translate as pity is often used to describe how Jesus felt toward the lost and the least. In the parables, Jesus himself used it only three times: to convey how the king looked on the servant in today's story, how the father looked on the prodigal son, and how the Samaritan looked on the beaten man in the ditch. The word suggests divine compassion. It is how God feels when looking at people in trouble in a world that is a mess.

We heard a similar act of divine compassion 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. Then one day his brothers came begging to be forgiven. What happened? Joseph looked on them with divine compassion. He wept and spoke kindly to them. The message of today's Scripture readings could not be more obvious. It is the command to practice forgiveness from the heart. It is the call to feel divine compassion.

Last Tuesday I was surprised to learn that it was a minor secular holiday: National Pardon Day. Who knew? It's really a thing. On September 8, 1974 President Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon for any and all of his crimes associated with the Watergate scandal. At the time it was a highly controversial move, and Ford paid the price by losing the 1976 election. But today even the most strident critics agree that pardoning Nixon was a good thing that allowed the country to move forward. Therefore, the gist of the holiday is that every September 8th we should all issue some pardons of our own. We should all be more forgiving. So how about you? Did you try it? Did it work? Sad to say, I confess that my heart was unmoved. I did not participate in National Pardon Day.

You see, Jesus was talking about forgiveness from the heart, and you can't command matters of the heart. You can't manufacture compassion through force of will or the creation of a holiday. It would be like commanding me to enjoy cilantro. Cilantro is an herb that I expect to find in Mexican food. It belongs there. It is tasty there. But everywhere else it is an overpowering, noxious weed that spoils the entire dish. My quarrel is that chefs these days put cilantro on or in just about everything. I do not like it, and you can't make me like it. You could preach sermons about cilantro until you are blue in the face and my heart would not be moved. I would grant no pardon. In the same way, you can't command people to grant compassion. You can't order up forgiveness from the heart and expect it to appear. Forgive without ceasing? An angry world remains unconvinced.

Another red flag in the parable is the forgiven servant himself, who proves to be unworthy of the king's compassion. As you know, he went out and throttled the neck of a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars – a pittance compared to what he'd been forgiven. So we worry that forgiveness is unjust, and allows perpetrators of wrong simply to continue in their evil ways. Calling for victims to practice forgiveness hardly seems right. Something has to change. "No justice, no peace" is the cry we've heard on the streets this summer – again, and again, and again. The demonstrators have a point. So what do we do with the clarion call to forgiveness that we hear in today's readings? When are we going to start doing it? How many sermons do we need to hear? To forgive or not to forgive? That is the question.

We could go on and on with all sorts of reasonable, understandable reasons not to forgive the people who hurt us. But the truth is, Jesus encourages us to be like the king and be like Joseph and practice divine compassion. In doing so, Jesus appeals to our own self-interest. The parable

implies that the one who doesn't forgive winds up being the tortured person. You heard that right: the one who doesn't forgive winds up being the tortured person. Why? Because going through life gripping your grudges is exhausting. It is an intolerable burden, and it is Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

I want to speak here with deep humility. I do not presume to tell anyone who has been abused, or hated, or robbed, or discarded what to do or how to feel. The only bit of good news I would offer is that you can go to Jesus. "Take it to the Lord in prayer," is how the refrain from an old hymn states it. You might begin by praying for yourself. Pray that God will fill you with the Holy Spirit and empower you to forgive. Give it time. Forgiveness is a process. You might use today's readings from Genesis and Matthew for Scriptural inspiration. Read them through slowly, once every day. Linger over the shades of meaning we all miss in our haste to move along to the next thing. Let the Spirit of God go to work on your heart.

Then, when the time is right (and the Spirit will let you know when the time is right) you can begin praying not for yourself, but for the one whom you need to forgive. Bring the person to mind and pray for him or her every day. Mind you, now, don't pray for the miserable wretch to come around to your point of view, and see how wrong he or she is. Don't even pray about the issue that divides you. Such prayers do more to accentuate the rancor than alleviate it. Rather, pray for the person's happiness, peace, joy, success, and health. Pray that God would shower lavish blessings and all good things upon the person. Make it a daily discipline to pray for the well-being of the person you need to forgive. How long should you keep at these prayers? Pray them until you actually mean them. Pray them until God changes you more and more into the likeness of Jesus, who looked on his abusers with divine compassion and said, "Father, forgive them."

I'm thinking of the late Simon Wiesenthal, who was an Austrian Jewish Holocaust survivor and author. In his book, The Sunflower, he describes his ordeal as a prisoner in a Polish concentration camp. He was assigned to clean garbage and waste out of a hospital area reserved for Nazi SS troopers. One day a nurse summoned him to the bedside of a dying German soldier who had begged to speak with a Jew. The soldier was in agony from his mortal wounds, but even more so from his tortured conscience. He explained to Wiesenthal that earlier in that year his division had been ordered into a Russian village. They rounded up the Jews and committed deadly atrocities. He himself had opened fire on an entire family. Now the soldier's guilt over his actions and horror at himself were too much to bear. He confessed with genuine repentance, "I know that what I've told you is terrible. In the long nights I have been waiting for death, time and again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness." Wiesenthal stood speechless for a long while. Then, without saying a word, he turned his back and left the room.

Simon Wiesenthal barely survived the concentration camp and went on to lead a remarkable life, combatting antisemitism and bringing Nazi war criminals to justice. But he explained in his book that he remained a prisoner to his experience with the dying German soldier, wondering if he did the right thing. Perhaps forgiveness of such magnitude should be left to God. But then why would Jesus have spoken the parable we've heard today? Wiesenthal ends his book with the haunting invitation to put yourself in his place, and ask, *What would I have done?*

To forgive or not to forgive? That is the question. I'll keep preaching about it until we get it right – myself included. I'll keep preaching about tithing, too, (especially next month during pledge campaign time) until we learn to walk in the way of divine compassion, trusting in him who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."