

## Proper 19 (A), September 14, 2014. Matt. 18:21-35.

Perhaps some of you were brought up in a way that is similar to how I was: with a tremendous fear of the wrath of God. I was brought up in a Pentecostal sect, where sin was everywhere and brought hell always with it. Every day, we teetered on the edge of damnation.

In that kind of environment, we thought about forgiveness A LOT, as you can imagine. Without a constant, almost mechanical, renewal of God's forgiveness, we could be swallowed up by hell at any time. If you did grow up like this then hopefully, like me, you eventually grew out of your devotion being entirely shaped by fear. But as I reflected this week on our gospel for this morning, I realized something. As I began to understand God's love better, and so the constant threat of hell receded from my mind, I also stopped thinking very much about forgiveness. And I realized with horror this week that my thinking about forgiveness has at times devolved to "Well, I probably haven't committed any sins that God would be worried about, but if I have, I'm sure God forgives me."

There is more to forgiveness than that. In fact, our gospel this morning rather emphatically makes the point that forgiveness is not just one of those quaint words that we hear in church: it is foundational to our Christian life together.

Forgiveness is foundational to the Christian life. Well, if that's the case, then we can't afford to leave it to the televangelists and distortions of my childhood religion. We have to take it on. We have to figure out what on earth we mean by it. Let's start with this morning's story.

The first thing to notice is that, like last week, the context of the question is the church. Peter asks "If another member **of the church** sins against me, how often must I forgive?" This does not mean that we have no obligation to forgive non-Christians, but it does set us up initially with the question of how we are to live together as Christians. And Peter's idea actually is quite generous. There was a popular rabbinic tradition at the time that set the number of required pardons at three. And so Peter is more than doubling what most faithful Jews at the time thought was required.

Jesus' response is a play on words, almost (but not quite) a joke: not seven, but seventy-seven—or, in some manuscripts, 70 times 7. Fortunately, it doesn't matter what the actual number is. Jesus' point isn't that you need a bigger number. It is that when it comes to forgiveness, you need to throw numbers out the window. That simply isn't how forgiveness, at least in God's church, works.

There is no ledger, it is not a part of the justice system. I read somewhere this week that we might better understand Jesus' point if we were to imagine the question: how many times should I love someone? Or how many loves should I give a brother or sister in the faith? The language of quantifying and measuring simply does not apply.

But then what about this parable? It enumerates precisely how much debt each person owes and is forgiven or held accountable for. This parable is hard to understand because most of us are not very adept at translating "talents" and "denarii" into dollars and cents. But what this first guy owed, ten thousand talents, was the equivalent of 150,000 years of wages. The second guy owed a hundred denarii, which was about the value of a hundred day's wages. The sense is that our unpleasant main character owes a kajillion dollars, and he is owed a hundred bucks. Or, to put it as strongly as I can, it is as if I were forgiven all of my student loans, but were to hassle my friend about twenty

dollars. The numbers are deliberately ridiculous, because part of the point is to get us to stop thinking about forgiveness in terms of tallies.

So how are we to think of forgiveness? What can we get from this parable and its disturbing conclusion, besides satire? I have some suggestions. First, forgiveness is a communal practice. It is something that we do together, and something we help each other to do. Yes, at times one of you needs to forgive just me, and it seems like a private transaction. But forgiveness is most possible when we are beginning from a community that cherishes a commitment to forgiving one another. In this story, our minds are set on this track by Peter's initial question about the church and the role that the community of servants plays in the misadventures of our unkind servant.

And what about the role of this community of servants? It gives me my second suggestion: forgiveness is not the same thing as enabling. The master forgives the debt of this servant, but that does not mean that he is not held accountable for his behavior. When he abuses someone else, the community as a whole holds him accountable. This is an important point, because the church's teachings on forgiveness have too often been used to cover up abuse or deny women the right to leave abusive relationships. We are called to forgive: no one is called to be abused.

Suggestion three: forgiveness is fluid and participatory. Hold on, I'll explain what I mean. I mean that forgiveness, like love or energy, is not created—it flows. Forgiveness flows unendingly from God through us, and then through us to each other and to the whole world that needs to hear those precious and incredibly difficult words, “you are forgiven.” Put another way: we cannot really forgive until we are able to believe that we are forgiven. The unkind servant in this parable acts irrationally—it makes no sense for him to be so harsh over such a paltry debt when he had just been forgiven so much. The guy suddenly has a lot more financial flexibility, so why would he react this way?

I think one explanation might be that he had not yet fully accepted that he was truly forgiven. He continues to act like a desperate debtor, even when he has been set free. In a few minutes we will confess our sins, and Paris will assure us that God forgives us. Then a few minutes after that, in the Lord's Prayer, we will tell God that we are going to forgive those who have trespassed against us. What I am saying is that unless we truly believe that God has forgiven us, we will not be able to forgive anyone else. The first step to forgiving, is believing that we are forgiven.

Finally, forgiveness is liberating. The end of this parable brings us theological liberals up short. Mainline preachers across the country today are pretending like this passage ended several verses early. Well, I think that we can do something with it. This terrible ending where God threatens to turn us over to the torturers is finally not telling us what will happen to us in the future, but is describing the state that we are already in when we cannot forgive or admit that we are forgiven. A life where we do not let forgiveness flow through us is already hell—we don't need eternal damnation. Forgiveness liberates us from the hellish cycle of anger, grudges, guilt, and revenge. It frees us from the dead hope that the past might change, and opens us—together—to the possibilities of the future.