

Matthew 18:21-35
Sunday, September 13, 2020

Grace First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Ashley Drake Mertz

You will recall that we are in the Season of Peace and this week the focus is on Peace in Relationships. If you have not been using the daily devotionals, I encourage you to check those out. If you have trouble accessing them from the links on Church Matters we'll be happy to send you a printed copy. Just contact the church office. Today's second reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18 verses 21-35. Listen for God's word to you this day:

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

"For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

And out of pity for him the lord of the slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord

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summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 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 is the word of God for the people of God..

We, disciples of Jesus, are located in the text as the slave being forgiven, and so the bulk of the story deals with our relationship to God, the king, and other disciples, those in the church. This parable is filled with absurdity that can easily be lost without historical understanding. There is no way the slave could have owed such a large sum of money and absolutely no way he could have repaid it. The forgiveness offered from the king to the slave is an extravagant gesture extended in an absurdly extravagant situation. In comparison with the grandiose amount of debt forgiven by the king we have the extremely small amount of money for which the slave does not forgive the other slave adding to the absurdity of this passage. But like usual Jesus does have a point to this extreme story that he shares with Peter and the others. The absurdity of the parable shows the absurdity of God's grace and forgiveness toward us, while also shifting our focus from a narrow, myopic view of sin and forgiveness to an expansive, wholistic view that encompasses extreme situations.

This is the second week in a row we have texts addressing life in the church. There is an expectation for Matthew and his community that the communal life of Jesus' followers differs from what can be seen in other communal settings.

And, it is within the process that was discussed last week that this section of text stakes its requirements for life in the church. The one that requires going directly to an offender to seek healing, and involving the community as necessary, it is a model that bears repeating because it is so outside our desired way of engaging.

Peter begins this section of the text by asking how many times a disciple of Jesus must forgive a church member who has sinned against them. When can we stop forgiving he seems to ask Jesus? When is enough, enough? More bluntly stated he might have asked: when can we treat others in harsh, unkind, violent ways? And Jesus responds, we are to forgive seventy-seven times, words that are sometimes translated as seventy times seven times.

Then we get into the parable, the one where God forgives the disciple for extraordinary debt, but the disciple will not forgive the fellow disciple for their small debt and brings punishment on them. Then the fellow disciples, church members, report back to God the ways of the forgiven disciple. At this point the story shifts, the king of the slaves punishes the slave who does not forgive. And the text says, "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt." And Jesus continues, "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 text seems to say that God will not extend forgiveness to us if we do not in fact extend forgiveness to others. The harsh punishment extolled on the first slave for not forgiving the second slave leaves us with assumptions that God is angry and retributive. Retribution is the form of justice with which we are most comfortable so it makes sense that we would like to also identify our God in that way. It makes us feel as

though the wrong has been made right, and gives us satisfaction that if our life has been injured someone else's will be too. But is this really the way God wants us to view justice as people of faith?

As Richard Rohr has been discussing this week, "The trouble is that we defined God as "punisher in chief" instead of Healer, Forgiver, and Reconciler; thus, the retribution model was legitimized all the way down!"¹ However, like the rest of the passage, this strong, absurd reaction is to make a point.

Jesus may in fact be invoking a little fear into the disciples, but his point is that a life of faith is about more than retribution, it is about restoration and healing in relationships, the very thing the king offers the first slave at the beginning of the parable. Peace in relationships cannot happen when feelings of ill will are harbored in ones heart. Jesus says that it is the forgiveness that happens within our heart that is most important to a perfected, whole, healing that could require forgiveness to be extended seventy seven times. But, in order to enact this way of being in relationship we must better understand it.

Rohr goes on when talking about restorative justice in relationships saying, "Mere counting and ledger-keeping are not the way of the Gospel. Our best self wants to restore relationships, and not just blame or punish. This is the "economy of grace" and an operative idea of *restorative justice*."²

Relationships in the church are the ideal place to practice this sort of healing and peace. Our common submission to the headship of Jesus Christ gives us the chance to

¹ Rohr, Richard, <https://cac.org/restoring-relationships-2020-09-06/>.

² Rohr, Richard, <https://cac.org/restoring-relationships-2020-09-06/>.

learn from and with one another. Because we have been forgiven for the great divide we create between ourselves and our creator we too are called to forgive those who sin against us, who create divides in our relationships.

Richard Rohr quotes “Teachers and practitioners Elaine Enns and Ched Myers’, definitions of restorative justice and peacemaking, saying they are “a range of nonviolent responses to injustice, violation, and/or violence with the aim of

1. reducing or halting the presenting violence in order that
2. victims and offenders (as well as their communities and other stakeholders) can collectively identify harms, needs, and responsibilities so that
3. they can determine how to make things as right as possible, which can include covenants of accountability, restitution, reparations and (ideally) reconciliation.”

We all need to apologize, and we all need to forgive, for humanity to have a sustainable future. Otherwise, we are controlled by the past, individually and corporately. History easily devolves into taking sides, bitterness, holding grudges, and the violence that inevitably follows. No wonder that almost two-thirds of Jesus’ teaching is directly or indirectly about forgiveness. As others have said, “Forgiveness is to let go of our hope for a different past.” *Reality is what it is*, and such acceptance leads to great freedom, and the possibility of healing forgiveness.”³

³ Rohr, Richard. <https://cac.org/restoring-relationships-2020-09-06/>.

Retribution looks like the slave who will not forgive the small debt by the other slave.

Retribution looks like I'm going to get mine no matter what.

Retribution looks like a self-centered, myopic view of the world.

Restoration looks like hearing the other persons truth and responding with grace.

Restoration looks like forgiveness that brings abundant life to all involved.

Restoration is to move into the future with the hope of wholeness and healing.

This is not the way we have been taught to live in the world. This idea of restorative justice in relationships is however the thing that will bring peace in our relationships and is the example of forgiveness we receive on a daily basis from God.

Martin Luther insists, "Faith in God naturally brings forth acts of love toward the neighbor. The servant's unwillingness to forgive reveals his lack of gratitude, which brings him crashing back into his own debt."⁴

The model of prioritizing restoration in relationships is lived out in numerous cultures, and we as Christians live it out when we honor the command given to us by Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our neighbor in our church, our neighbor in our community, our neighbor in our homes.

As part of God's creation, as people created for relationship, a posture of restoration is the only way we can reach our full potential for peace, both within and in relationship. We as the church are the ones called to model this approach for the world. As we consider Luther's words about being compelled to action by our faith may we continuously work toward healing and wholeness, creating opportunities for peace in relationships and allowing forgiveness where our hopes for what was to be have been

⁴ Blanchard, Kathryn D., Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, 70.

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left unmet. It is in the sure and certain hope of the grace extended to us by God that we approach one other with whole-hearted forgiveness so that we may create peace in this time and place.