

## Homily for Pentecost 15, 2020

Mathew 18:21-35

*'Forgiving mercy'*

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### TEXT - Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

<sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

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### INTRODUCTION

I was listening some time ago to a fairly prominent public figure,  
A speaker and author,

He's a person who wouldn't necessarily call himself a Christian,

but acknowledges how important the Bible has been for our culture,  
and what Christianity has done for our civilization,  
that sort of thing.

But within that context,  
he said something which really got my attention,  
which was that, in his opinion,

A part of the Christian tradition he doesn't resonate with,  
Is the emphasis on forgiveness.

He said, in fact, he thought,  
Forgiveness was **overrated**.

It made me realize just how much forgiveness is a distinguishing feature of  
Christianity.

Far from being an optional appendix to how we live as Christian people,  
Forgiveness is at the heart and center of the Christian message,

*'How many times should I forgive Lord? As many as seven?'*

*Not seven, but 77 times!'*

In other words,  
Never stop,  
Never give up,  
There is no limit to forgiveness in the kingdom of God,

And yet,  
It can be so so hard can't it?  
To forgive.

Why is that?  
And where do we get the power to grow as people who forgive?

That's what Jesus addresses in the parable we'll look at more closely now.

As we do we'll see:

First, a forgiveness and mercy **received**,  
Second forgiveness and mercy **withheld**,  
And third forgiveness and mercy **lost**.

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## **FORGIVENESS AND MERCY RECEIVED**

So first there is forgiveness and mercy **received**.

Peter's question was about forgiving others,  
And Jesus conclusion right at the end is also about forgiving others,

But notice then that when Jesus gives his parable to illustrate this he starts  
somewhere else,

He doesn't start with the forgiveness and mercy you are called to show to others,

He starts with the forgiveness and mercy you have **received** from God,  
That's where the power lies for growing in the life of forgiveness.

To make this point,  
Jesus compares his disciple,  
To a person who owed a King an extraordinary and unpayable debt,

Which would end up having him and his whole family sold into slavery.

when the debtor pleads with the King for patience,

The king has pity/compassion on him,  
Forgives the debt and lets him go.

But the real punch to the parable is in **quantity** of the debt.

10 000 talents we read,  
So what is that?

A talent was originally a form of currency,  
A sum of money.

It's a little hard to work out exactly what it was,  
But it was big.

Estimates usually range from between 15-20 years worth of wages.

Now hear me carefully again.

1 talent was worth between 15-20 years worth of wages,

And this servant owed the king 10 000 talents.

Now it's been a little while since I've had to do math's,

But by my calculations,  
That's between 150 000 and 200 000 years worth of wages.

I believe the technical financial term for this amount is zillions and squillions!

Do you get the point?

it's absurd,  
It's crazy,

It's like working for Bill Gates and somehow managing to bankrupt him.

It's an impossible situation to imagine in this world.

But remember, it's not about this world,  
It's about the kingdom of heaven.  
This is about us before God.

Our Lord Jesus wants to impress upon us that our spiritual condition before God apart  
from Christ,  
is far worse than we imagine,

There is nothing we could ever do or give that would come close to making up for it on  
our own.

It's only the sheer unfathomable mercy of God in Christ Jesus,  
That we can be forgiven.

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I wonder if you've ever been in significant debt?

Perhaps some of you are right now.

Just think about the experience.

Most people can resonate with that experience in one way or another,

Some people handle it better than others,

But overall it can be a very powerful force in one's life can't it?

That debt hangs over your head,  
Perhaps it keeps you up at night,

It influences many different decisions you make,  
Perhaps it's negatively effects relationships.

But on the positive side,  
I wonder if you've ever had the experience of having a debt cancelled,  
A debt forgiven?

I've had this with small personal loans in my life,  
Where someone has said toward the end of the repayments,

Let's call it closed,

Don't worry about the last repayments

The debt's cancelled.

If you've ever had that sort of experience just think about how even in small ways this  
can be quite transformative as to how you approach life,

Everything looks different,  
Possibilities open up,  
The utter relief of being free from that.

And Jesus says,  
Your God the king of the universe,  
Out of sheer mercy,  
Has forgiven you a spiritual debt the size of which is incomprehensible,

And of course we who know the end of the Gospel narrative know,

That it's the one who tells the parable,  
Who himself has come to pay the price.

He's come to give his life as a ransom,

He paid the price for your forgiveness,  
Not gold or silver but his holy, precious blood,  
And his innocent suffering and death.

So there's forgiveness and mercy *received* – that's where it begins.

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## **FORGIVENESS AND MERCY WITHELD**

Then there is forgiveness and mercy *withheld*.  
Now we're back to the actual situation of Peter's question,

Forgiving a brother or sister.

And Jesus is giving us a picture of what it's like when we who have received the extraordinary forgiveness and mercy of God,

Don't pass that on others,  
Or in fact pass on the opposite.

He says this same servant who had been forgiven the incalculable debt,

Comes across another servant who owes him a much smaller debt of 100 denarii,  
And he begins to choke him.

You are meant to picture the utter absurdity of this scene,

That a man who has just been forgiven a debt of 200 000 years worth of wages,  
Has his hands around the neck of a guy indebted to him to the tune of thousands of  
times less.

And not only that, it gets worse,  
Because the one in debt pleads with this guy for patience,  
using almost exactly the same words as he himself had used with the king,

But instead of showing mercy and forgiveness,

He throws him into prison.

And Jesus is saying,  
This is you Peter,  
This is us,

When we Christian people who have received the extraordinary mercy and  
forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus,

Withhold that same mercy and forgiveness for those who wrong us.

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Now I want to point out though,  
That a 100 denarii debt,  
is not nothing.

We know even more precisely than we do with a talent,  
that a denarius was the common wage for one day's work.

So a debt of 100 days work,  
Let's say three months wages or so,

On it's own,

That's still significant,

It's just that it's insignificant compared to the other debt which was forgiven.

I wonder whether this detail of the hundred denarii is important,

Because when we struggle to forgive our brothers or sisters for the ways in which they hurt us,

Jesus is not casually saying 'it's no big deal', just get over it.

He's not saying those sins and hurts aren't real.

No,  
100 denarii,  
Three months wages,

Our sins against each other do hurt and do cause damage,

And that's why Jesus outlined the steps he did last week for doing something about it.

And also forgiveness doesn't mean this sort of behavior is okay and is to be tolerated in the Christian community.

But when it comes to the bottom line,  
and whether you can forgive a person the sin they've committed,

Or you feel the need to hold on to the right to be vindicated and even take revenge,

Jesus says you need to see these sins others do to you,  
In the perspective of your sin before God,

And then Jesus says,  
There's no comparison.

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Naturally we just don't operate this way, do we?



The natural default approach of our sinful human hearts is want to seek revenge,  
Not to offer forgiveness.

You see this in children from a very early age don't you.

The indignation that arises within us when we feel we've been wronged and justice  
hasn't been done,

And even a little child will just watch and wait for his or her opportunity to get back at  
'em,  
To take that toy,  
To ruin that picture,  
To give 'em one behind the ears.

And the main difference I can see as adults,

Is that we just get more sophisticated about how we do it.

I've mentioned before in preaching on Cain and Abel here,  
That phrase we have in English,  
To nurse a grudge.

Have you ever reflected on just what a vivid and terrible image that is?

That we have these grudges against other people,  
We have these feelings of anger or resentment and we refuse to forgive,

And we handle those feelings as a mother would tenderly care for her new-born baby,  
We nurse it,  
We feed it,  
We hold it close and don't want to let it go.

This is us,  
And Jesus is about to warn us very strongly against continuing down that path.

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## **FORGIVENESS AND MERCY LOST**

Because there's forgiveness and mercy received,  
Then there's forgiveness and mercy withheld,  
And finally there's forgiveness and mercy lost.

This scandalous behavior of the unforgiving servant gets the attention of some other servants.

They're distressed by what they see,  
We're not told why exactly,

But I'm reminded here,  
That in community,

Forgiveness between two people is never just between two people,

There's always a communal dimension,  
It affects others either positively,  
Or negatively.

So they report to the King.

And the King who was previously forgiving and merciful to an unimaginable extent,

Shows now that his mercy is never to be presumed upon,  
And that it can be lost if it isn't passed on.

*"You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.*

*<sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

Do you get the feeling Jesus is pretty serious about this?

Unforgiveness and refusal to show mercy is a spiritually dangerous game.

And if it isn't bad enough that it tears marriages apart,  
And tears families apart,  
And tears congregations apart,

And scandalizes others in their faith,  
And forms a barrier to others hearing the Gospel,

If all that isn't bad enough,

Jesus says,  
It can also lead you to lose the forgiveness and mercy of God you had,

By refusing to pass it on.

Forgiveness and mercy is like the air we breathe to live,

You can do nothing to make yourself spiritually alive,  
That forgiveness and mercy must come to you from God,  
You receive it,  
You breathe it in.

But you can't live holding your breath,  
If you hold it long enough in fact you'll die.

As we breathe it in,  
So we must breathe it out.

\*

So think very personally and practically now,

Think of a person you've found it hard to forgive,  
Think of an unreconciled relationship in your life,  
Bring to mind that grudge you've been nursing,

Perhaps for a long long time.

Given the mercy and forgiveness God has shown to you in Christ Jesus,  
Your Lord Jesus calls you to forgive your brother or sister from the heart.

Perhaps pray that prayer in the midst of the Lord's prayer,  
Forgive us our sins,

As we forgive those who sin against us,

And have that particular person in mind.

And then think about something practical and concrete you may be able to do,  
Towards making this forgiveness and reality in that relationship.

Is there just one thing you could do this week?  
This afternoon?

Just some small step toward forgiveness and reconciliation?  
Perhaps a visit?  
A phone call?  
Writing to someone?

Don't hold onto the anger, the bitterness,  
The unforgiveness,

*'Be tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.'* Eph 4:32.

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## **CONCLUSION**

There was forgiveness and mercy received,  
Forgiveness and mercy withheld,  
And forgiveness and mercy lost.

Despite what the world thinks,  
Jesus didn't think forgiveness was overrated.

He came to give his very life to make forgiveness possible.

It was at the heart of the matter for him,  
As it is for us.

As many as seven times?  
No I tell you, 77 times.

God grant it to us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.