

“To Infinity and Beyond”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
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Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then 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?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This passage from Matthew is a fine example of the use of exaggeration. Just look right there at the top, in Peter’s question to Jesus. “How many times should I forgive a fellow church member?” Now, be honest: how many times would you or I let bygones be bygones? Once? Twice? Or, perhaps, never? But Peter’s baseline is seven! That already seems generous. But that’s not good enough for Jesus. No, he says to forgive seventy-seven times, or perhaps seven times seventy—that’s 490 times! That’s over the top! It calls to mind the catchphrase of the irrepressible Buzz Lightyear in the *Toy Story* movies: “To Infinity and Beyond!” Filled with enthusiasm, but frankly, impossible.

So, why the hyperbolic language?

We begin by noting that this passage is about life in community, specifically that one we call the church. And although the church was ordained by God, not all is perfect—it is

filled with people, after all, people who will wrong one another and hurt one another. Peter wants to know what to do when that happens to him. Matthew relates Jesus' answer to his disciple—and to us.

Jesus tells him to offer forgiveness, extravagantly, profligately.

Then, to illustrate what he means, Jesus tells a parable. But rather than clarifying things, it seems to muddy the waters by prompting a big question.

If we look at the story Jesus tells, we see exaggeration is once again the order of the day. A king, a master, wants to hold his people to account. He calls in one of his slaves and asks to be repaid what he's owed. The sum: ten thousand talents. Now, we don't need to be conversant in the value of ancient currencies to know that ten thousand of anything is a large number. But just so you know, according to one commentary I consulted, the equivalent is 5 billion pounds sterling, or about \$6.5 billion! There's no way the slave could repay this debt—and that's the point. He has dug himself a hole so deep he can't escape, and as a result he will lose *everything*. Fortunately, the king's heart swells with sympathy for his slave, and he forgives the man his debt.

Now, the story could have ended here, and we could all have a warm, fuzzy feeling as we contemplate this illustration of mercy shown and received.

But the story doesn't end here. It goes on, taking a dark turn.

The forgiven slave is owed a far smaller amount of money by one of his fellow slaves, who asks for a little forbearance. But the former is not in a forgiving mood. Instead, he grabs the man by the neck and has him thrown into debtor's prison.

The other slaves in the king's household, their peers, are shocked by this turn of events. Perhaps they wonder what kind of malice their compatriot might show them, and so they go to the master to tell him what has transpired.

By now, I hope it's clear that the king is God, and the slaves are the people of the church, which is why the story's ending is so chilling.

The master is furious, telling the first slave that it's off to the torturer until his original (remember, unpayable!) debt is discharged.

And then Jesus wraps up his parable by making clear that this is what will happen to his disciples if they fail to forgive their brothers and sisters in the church.

Where is the God that John tells us is love? Where is the limitless grace? The infinite mercy we laud in prayers and hymns? Are there actually limits on God's forgiveness? Have we been misrepresenting the story of what God will actually do for us?

The short answer is no. But we need to remember that we are not passive players in the drama. Our actions matter. What we do in a community will not stay hidden.

Consider forgiveness. We have all needed to seek forgiveness at one time or another during our lives. It's not always easy to own up to our faults or wrongdoing. But we do that, imagining what it will be like when someone tells us that all will indeed be well, that we are forgiven, and that life can move forward.

Now let's consider what it is like to *extend* forgiveness. Ah, that's a different situation, is it not? If we think about it, granting forgiveness can be much harder than being forgiven. We need to cede control of a situation, let go of our grudges, risk being hurt another time, and give a free pass to one who has wronged us!

That can be hard.

Very hard.

But it is necessary if we are to live in community, to be part of the church. Forgiving does not entail forgetting, but it does require a choice on our part not to invest our time and effort in nurturing our resentment. That's psychic and spiritual and emotional energy that can be put to other, more productive, more Godly uses.

Jesus knew that people tend to overestimate what they are capable of. We might think that we can love God while hating our neighbor, but he knows that is not true. We will wind up loving God *or* hating our neighbor. Similarly, we may hope that we can love God while resenting our fellow church member, but Jesus knew that this is a binary choice: either God *or* our grudges, we get to choose.

If we look back at today's lesson from Exodus, it seems the destruction of the Egyptian army is being celebrated in an exaltation of violence. But this isn't so much a story of "us against them" as it is a display of realized consequences. Remember, the Egyptians had been warned time and again to let the Israelites go. One, two, ultimately ten plagues were inflicted, each of which might have been avoided had the Egyptians, had Pharaoh, not chosen mastery of the Hebrews over listening to the word of God.

When we hear this story in a Christian context, we remember that the church has taught that Jesus was the new Moses, leading us through the waters of baptism to new life. In the early church, baptism was available only to adults, who had to prepare to become members of the body of Christ. A choice was made. Some things were set aside so that other things might be taken up. And while the journey of baptism was and is available to all people in all places, not just to one group being led to freedom, there was a recognition that even the saved might backslide, might be in need of a reminder that they were making a choice. Hence today's lesson from Matthew.

So the notion that there are limits to God's forgiveness isn't something we need to be worried about. What we need to think about is how we, through our choices and actions, might limit the ability of God's grace to work in our lives.

When we fail to forgive others in the church, the problem is even greater, for we are then impeding the ability of the body that God has gathered to thrive, to serve as a place where people can experience God's grace. We have all seen the church fail to live up to the high standards to which it is called. The result is that people become frustrated, disheartened, and ultimately they fall away.

That's why this is such a big deal, why the consequences for failing to offer forgiveness are so great. It's not just about us as individuals and our own walk with God, which, by the way, will be impeded. It's about our communal journey with the Lord. We may feel that we have little influence in life, but that is not true. Each of us can make decisions that will affect all of us, even God.

Later during our service we will say the Lord's Prayer, just like we do every week. Many of us say it other times during the week, too. You know the familiar words:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

This is the version of the prayer we find in Matthew. It's especially powerful and poignant in light of today's Gospel lesson, with "debts" taking on a whole new meaning after we have read Jesus' parable.

And then there is the contingent nature of the request we make to God.

Forgive us—as we first forgive others. No more, no less.

What we do with regard to others sets the boundaries for what God should do for us. That's an incredible proposition. But it's one that Jesus told us to adopt; we are called to make the hope for our salvation dependent on how we treat others.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, tells the story of a single mom with kids who belonged to his congregation. Money was tight for the family, and the woman was brimming with resentment towards her ex-husband, who had just up and left to live with someone else. Kushner asked why she held onto her anger, why she didn't forgive the man. She was surprised. She replied that she and her children had been put through a lot, and she was entitled to be angry. Why on earth should she forgive her ex?

Kushner's response was that she would be letting herself, not her ex, off the hook. The man was already physically removed from her life; now was the time for her to remove him from her head.

There's an image that's gained renewed currency lately, the idea of someone taking out a lease on space in someone else's head. The idea is that a person becomes so preoccupied with what another has done, they can't stop thinking about them. When those actions have created a grudge, that resentment can fill our hearts, our souls, our minds. They can warp and distort our very lives.

Now, I will note that I am not saying an abused person should forgive his or her abuser and submit to more such behavior. No. But I am saying an abused person needs to explore whether the withholding of forgiveness from another is worth the psychic and emotional toll that will be exacted. For only by forgiving will one be free to strike out on a new path.

Each of us has agency. Sometimes we may need help in exercising it, but it's there. And that help may be found in God's church, which should be able to provide the support we need to act, to live.

Today's lesson needs to be heard, particularly in this time of division. We hear a lot about polarization, about differences in society. The temptation not simply to disagree with someone with unpalatable views but to condemn them, to shun them, is one we should resist. We must, if we want to remain a community, the church of Jesus Christ, which the world needs today as much as it ever has. God wishes to forgive each of us, but we should do likewise with his people. It's what Jesus would do. And it's what Jesus wants us to do with faith, with generosity, with a desire to live in the Spirit.