

Sermon 9/14/25

Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 17:3-4; Mark 11:25

Over 20 years ago, I was involved in the Connecticut Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. There I met Walt Everett, a retired UMC pastor who was involved with a group called Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. Walt had lost his son to gun violence. By his own account, he spent the first year after his son's death in a state of grief and rage, struggling to function. A year after his son's death, he went to the sentencing of the killer. During that hearing, Everett gave an impact statement talking about the suffering that the crime inflicted on his family. Of his own accord, the murderer rose and apologized for the act. He didn't say much beyond "I'm sorry," and most of those present dismissed his words. But Everett heard something that felt authentic in the killer's remorse. He thought he detected a stir of penance. The killer went to jail; Everett's rage and horror leveled off, and he decided to write a letter to the man responsible for his son's death. In the letter, he talked about the toll the crime had on his family; Then, weeping, he closed the letter with the words, "I forgive you."

I've always read the story from Matthew focused on the translation of the word "forgive." Re-reading it this week, I keep

coming back to the end, where the writer of Matthew has Jesus saying, “If you don’t forgive, my father will torture you.” To be honest, I’m not sure what to do with that. One commentator noted, “God will also imprison every person who does not forgive (their fellow humans) from the heart.”

From your hearts. Forgiveness must be real, sincere, not pretended, nor merely outward. There must not only be no outward act of revenge, but no malice in the heart, no storing up of evil plans for a future outlet, as the occasion may arise. The heart must be in harmony with the conduct, and both must evidence a true spirit of charity (we’ll come back to that word charity in a minute). This alone enables one to continue in a state of grace and in reconciliation with God, whose mercy is infinite and will be extended to us in measure unbounded.

But there's a second lesson: *to refuse to forgive inflicts inner torment upon us*. Remember how the story ends? "Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt." (Matthew 18:34).

"Well," you say, "that was just a parable. We can't press every point and say each little detail applies to us." Granted, but in this case, it's not a little detail. It's the punch line, the climax of the

whole story. This verse 35 is not part of the parable. It is a statement Jesus makes after the story ends. When Jesus said, "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you," he was referring back to the closing words of the parable, which says: "Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt."

Jesus says God personally will allow those who refuse to forgive others to be tortured! What in the world does that mean? The Greek term from which torturers is translated is a verb meaning "to torment"—a frightening thought. When I first saw the thing begin to take shape in my mind, I thought, "No, that's too harsh!" But the further I probed, the clearer it became.

Jesus is saying the one who refuses to forgive, who harbors grudges, bitter feelings toward another, will be turned over to torturous thoughts, feelings of misery, and agonizing unrest within.

And who hasn't endured such feelings? It is one of the horrible consequences of not forgiving those who offend us. It makes no difference who it is—one of your parents or in-laws, your pastor or former pastor, a close friend who turned against you, some

teacher who was unfair, a business partner who ripped you off, or your former spouse.

With this lesson in mind, let's now examine the definitions.

There are two Greek words that are used in the New Testament for forgiveness. One is the word charidzomai

khar-ID-zom-ahee and the other is aphimi **ah-FEE-ay-mee**.

The word charidzomai (khar-ID-zom-ahee) comes from the Greek word, charis, which means grace –so “charity” means “grace.”

The word translated forgiveness (charidzomai khar-ID-zom-ahee) can also be translated as cancelled...So, because of God's grace (charis) we are forgiven, our cosmic debt has been cancelled. This word is in the same family of words as the word translated “grace,” and it means to do something pleasant or agreeable, to do a favor to, to show one's self gracious, kind, benevolent to grant forgiveness, to pardon; also, to cancel a sum of money that is owed, a debt.

In the New Testament the most common word for forgiveness is word is ἀφίημι / aphīēmi (ah-FEE-ay-mee). It occurs 143 times in the New Testament, 127 of the uses being in the Gospel accounts, including the passage we heard today.

“When we forgive someone with the idea of *aphiemi* **ah-FEE-ay-mee**, we let something go. We don’t bring it up again. We don’t let it take over our hearts.”

Forgiving others can take time when something extremely hurtful has been experienced because of the sins and even crimes of others. But understanding God’s plan for forgiveness helps a believer in the process of forgiveness. Cancel the debt. Let it go.

In the context of forgiveness, it means “to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, to cancel, remit, or pardon.” Forgiveness is usually a local act, not a global one, and it rarely makes the news. Most of the time, the act of forgiveness happens quietly, between two people, with the world barely noticing. But for those two people, it may very well be the most important thing that happens in their lives.

This gospel reading, in other words, like so many others, really isn’t about what we should do to change the world. It is about what we should do to change ourselves.

This reading begins with Peter asking Jesus how often he should forgive someone. As many as seven times, he asks? Many rabbis at the time taught that three times was sufficient. So I’m sure Peter

thought that he was being quite generous, just as Jesus would want him to be.

But Jesus offers this surprising answer, that we should forgive someone not seven times, but seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven. The reality is that that was the highest number in their mathematical system at the time, which basically means that we should forgive to infinity, until we lose count. *Because forgiveness really isn't about math; it's about mercy.* And it's about doing for others what God does for us. There's no end to how many times we should forgive, because there's no end to how many times God has forgiven us. And to reinforce this point, Jesus then goes on to tell the very interesting and challenging parable that Cathy read today.

There is a servant, Jesus says, that owes his master an impossibly large sum of money, so much that no one in the world could ever possibly repay it.

In the ancient world, an insolvent debtor was sold and indentured to pay the remaining debt by working as a slave. Any spouse or child was also sold into slavery. This was the normal practice in the Roman Empire and in other kingdoms before them, including ancient Israel.

The master king in Jesus' story is therefore going against the entire tide of history. One of his people owed him an outrageous amount, the largest debt they could record. But this master would prefer to absorb the loss himself rather than have one of his families sold into slavery. The word used is "pity" but in the Greek it means pity, to feel sympathy, to be moved with compassion, His sympathy for his people outweighs how he feels about not being repaid the money.

This servant is in a hopeless situation. And he knows it. All he can do is fall on his knees and plead for mercy. Which he does. And the master decides to forgive this servant his entire debt. So, before we move to the next part of the parable, think about what Jesus is teaching us here. The master in this parable is like God. And the servant is like us. And this parable reminds us that what we owe God is beyond what we can ever hope to repay. God forgives us all of our trespasses, all of our debt. No matter our sin; no matter how much or how often we have messed up, God chooses to forgive it all.

So, what does the servant in this parable do, now that he has had his life changed by being forgiven this debt? As he is leaving the master, he encounters a fellow servant who owes him just a tiny

amount compared to what our protagonist owed to the master. And he throws this servant into prison until he would pay the debt. And we can't help but wonder – why would the servant not forgive that small amount after the master has just forgiven him this huge amount? Maybe this servant either expected the master to forgive him, as though he deserved to be forgiven; or the servant didn't really believe that his debt had truly been forgiven. If he didn't expect it, but now truly believed it, then it seems to me that he would gladly forgive the measly amount they owe him. But instead, he goes on in life without changing, and without forgiving. And the master finds out, and hands him over to be tortured until he repays the entire debt. And you can't blame the master, after what he has done for this guy. He's forgiven him a huge debt, and this guy can't forgive a friend a much, much smaller amount?

And Jesus concludes by encouraging (well, it sounds like threatening!) us to show mercy to our fellow humans, just as God has shown mercy to us. Today's gospel reading, when all is said and done, is not about how often we should forgive, or how much we should forgive. Again, it's not about math. It's about mercy.

Whatever you have done, or not done, that is contrary to God's desire for you, God has already forgiven you. And when we really

get our minds around how much God forgives us, and how much God still loves us, and how much God wants us to do the same for others, then there is no wrong, no injustice, no slight, no sin against us that can hold a candle to the wrongs we have done against God. And forgiving another person is simply a small way to pay it forward.

So, there are two things I'm wondering about 1) What is my job to forgive? And 2) What is God's job to forgive?

According to these passages it is my job to forgive over and over and over. Most especially, we are required to forgive when a person apologizes and asks for forgiveness (over and over and over - we heard that in the passage from Luke). So, you don't have to forgive if the person doesn't ask or is unrepentant. This makes sense in context. Repentance is important in the New Testament. If someone is not repentant, then you don't need to forgive them. Obviously, why would I keep forgiving someone who keeps hurting me and doesn't ask?

But I think that we still need to forgive because only forgiving when asked or when a person is repentant is only one type of forgiveness. I would argue that true forgiveness doesn't allow the other person to keep hurting you. True forgiveness doesn't keep

letting someone take energy or abuse power. That would be worse for both parties involved. True forgiveness is **letting go of** the negative feelings that you are justified in having. True forgiveness doesn't allow the transgressor to transgress again. True forgiveness requires divine intervention, because this letting go is not easy.

Famously, Nelson Mandela said, "As I walked out toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

Forgiveness isn't condoning bad behavior. ***It isn't letting someone off the hook or forgoing justice.*** Forgiveness closes the gap that justice cannot perfectly close. Forgiveness says, "I see your human dignity regardless of your behavior." And it also says, "I let go of the anger and bitterness held in my heart over this rift, crime, or injury."

We forgive because God forgives. We know that God weeps when one of us hurts another; and we know that God loves everyone, even those we have a hard time tolerating who may do unspeakable things. One line of scripture kind of permanently inked in my brain is from Ezekiel 33:11 – *God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from their ways*

and live. As noted, forgiving doesn't mean allowing those who hurt you to have continued access. It means, let go of your anger and give the disposition of the wrongdoer to God – to use a popular phrase that emerged from the 19th-century Keswick Theology, “let go and let God.” Amen.

Keswick Theology: Core Idea: "Let Go and Let God"

- The central idea is that Christians can experience a second "blessing" after their initial salvation, leading to a more victorious and deeper spiritual life.
- This second blessing is achieved through a dramatic process of surrender and faith, encapsulated in the phrase "let go and let God".
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- **Second Blessing Theology:**
It posits two distinct phases: initial salvation and a This involves relinquishing control, letting go of personal will, and allowing God's power to work in the believer's life.
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