

The Play Goes On  
Matthew 18:21-35  
September 14, 2008

Sometimes it's better to quit when you're ahead. Last week we heard Jesus tell the disciples how they should go about healing differences between them. If someone has been injured by another, then the injured party should take the initiative to go to the other and see if they can't air their grievances together, work it out, and be reconciled. And then if that doesn't do the trick, the injured one should bring along a little back up so that there can be conversation with more than just the two most directly involved, because after all, sometimes an outside party's impartial eye can do a lot to help us see what's what. And then, if that doesn't work, the entire congregation can be brought into the discussion. Sometimes no amount of talking works, and then Jesus says to treat the sinful person as a Gentile and a tax collector, but since we know how Jesus treated those kind of folks, we know we're not off the hook by a long shot.

Peter knew that too, that's why he just had to ask. Peter never does figure out when it's better just to keep silent; he's the one who's always the first to answer, the first to try, the first to fail. And now, he asks Jesus, "Well, how many times exactly do we have to forgive, seven times?" To Peter, that probably seemed like a gracious plenty since the rabbis of the time said three strikes and you're out. Someone messes with you for the fourth time, and you've got no obligation to forgive. So Peter is really stretching the general rule – multiplying it by two and adding one! Maybe he's catching on to Jesus' kind of generosity just a little bit, or maybe he's trying to set some limits on what seems like an unending process.

Jesus takes Peter's answer and raises it seventy times. It's not seven times, it's seventy times seven, or in other words, an infinite number of times that one must forgive. Now sometimes it's not only Peter who talks too much. This time it would have been a lot easier if Jesus had stopped with the multiplication tables. But no, he has to tell a story and when Jesus tells stories he usually tells us more than we really want to know.

It's a story in three acts. Act One: A king decides to audit his books and settle accounts with servants who owe him money. The first servant brought before him owes the enormous sum of 10,000 talents, an amount by today's standards equal to somewhere between \$10 million and \$1.5 billion, depending on which commentary you read.

The servant clearly can't pay that amount, so according to the custom of the day the king orders the servant and his family to be sold. This won't cover the debt, but the king will recover something. The servant, in a last ditch effort, falls on his knees promising to pay in full if given enough time. He knows and the king knows that that's impossible, even if he worked fifty hours a week for the next 150,000 years! But for whatever reason, the king is moved to cancel the debt and restore the servant and his family. The curtain closes on Act One with a very happy and very relieved servant celebrating his good fortune.

Act Two opens with the happy servant's encounter with someone who happens to owe him a small amount of money, perhaps a few hundred dollars, and the celebrant demands payment immediately. In an eerie playback of what he had said, he hears his debtor ask for the same patience he'd requested in Act One from the king. But unlike the forgiving king, he has the man thrown in debtor's prison. He kind of sounds like a first century Ebenezer Scrooge before his ghostly visitations.

Act Three, the concluding act of this tragedy, begins with tattle-tales, people full of righteous indignation blowing the whistle on the unforgiving servant. The king, angered by the servant's behavior, reverses his clemency and inflicts an even worse punishment than had originally been proposed. Now instead of merely being sold off to another master, the servant is to be imprisoned and continually tortured until he can pay this debt, which of course he can never do. This is a life sentence.

And just in case Peter, who sometimes isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, doesn't get every nuance of this melodrama, Jesus adds the punch line, "So my heavenly father will also do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Ouch. How did asking a simple question about how many times do we good folks, the ones who are trying our darnedest to be faithful disciples, have to forgive, end up with someone with whom we've probably identified, at least at first, winding up in prison tortured for life? What in the world was Jesus trying to tell Peter?

I think he was telling Peter in a very dramatic way, that Peter's question is based on Act Two; but without Act One, there can be no Act Two. Peter asks the wrong question—how many times must I forgive. That's an Act Two question. The first question is the Act One question: "How many times have I been forgiven? And for how much?" In other words, our ability to forgive is directly related to how well we understand our own forgiveness.

The servant in Jesus' story doesn't get it. He's been given his life back by a king who had every right to take it. There was no way he could ever have paid back the debt he owed, and the act of grace and mercy that cancelled his debt was enormous. But somehow he was left untouched by the king's incredible generosity. Maybe he thought he deserved it! Maybe he thought he was one lucky fellow. Maybe he thought it was the rabbit's foot he carried in his pocket, or that four-leaf clover he'd picked up; or maybe his astrological forecast had told him he'd be clever enough to make a great escape. Or maybe he wasn't motivated by regret, only sorry he'd been caught; maybe he wasn't sorry for the huge debt he'd run up, but was only motivated by fear, terrified of the consequences that awaited him, but had no sense of accountability for what had gotten him in his predicament.

With that kind of selfish thinking, he missed the experience of forgiveness altogether. It probably never occurred to him that he was being forgiven by someone who really wasn't interested in keeping score, but was more interested in wiping the slate clean and beginning again.

As a consequence, he saw no obligation to pass on the forgiveness he'd been given in his relationships with others. He believed in doing unto others before they did unto him. For him, it remained a dog-eat-dog world. So when his turn came, instead of passing forward the grace he'd received, he did what he had expected the king would do to him. He demanded payment and showed no mercy. He had missed his own forgiveness and so he couldn't forgive anyone else.<sup>1</sup>

So Act Three is inevitable. The king rescinds his pardon; the servant is thrown into a worse situation than before—life in prison, tortured daily, probably asking himself "how did this happen to me?" "Why me?"

But he did it to himself. As confusing as this parable is – especially as it relates to the character of the king when we try to equate him to God – Jesus seems to be making a point consistent with what he's been saying to the disciples all along. In the sermon on the Mount, he'd taught the disciples to pray, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," and then added for clarity "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15). He also said at the same time, "Judge not so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt 7:1-2).

Forgiveness is complicated – it's a product of divine/human cooperation and relationship. If we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven. It's not that God doesn't want to forgive; it's that we cannot receive it with a heart bent on vengeance, or full of anger. There's no room for anything else. It's kind of like a hand made into a fist. What can you put into that hand? Nothing. But when the hand is opened, reaching out to give, only then is it also open and able to receive. It is the same with our hearts. If they are open to forgiving, then they are also open to receiving forgiveness.

John Wesley, on one occasion, was trying to intercede with Governor George Oglethorpe on behalf of a servant who had drunk several bottles of the governor's wine. Oglethorpe said, "Sir, I never forgive." And Wesley replied, "Then, I hope you never offend."

The sad truth of the parable is that the unmerciful Servant was in prison long before the king put him there. He was imprisoned in his own world of selfishness, and need to have what was rightfully his. And he would relinquish nothing that was his. Frederick Buechner writes that in the Tower of London, directly below the Chapel of St. John, is the most terrible of all its dungeons. He describes it as having an

“oak door [that] blocks out all light and all ventilation. It measures only four feet square and four feet high. There is no way to either stand upright in it or to lie down at full length. It is known as ‘The Little Ease.’”<sup>2</sup>

To live an unforgiving life of restricted mercy is to live in that dark, airless, crippling place, where there is no ease at all. In that place, all we can feel are our own wounds; and all we can hear are our own angry thoughts. We’ll be damned before we’ll forgive; and that’s precisely what we are. The prison is of our own making.

I would like to think that the curtain does not ring down on Act Three, that it is not the conclusion to the drama, but that there is an Act Four, not described by Jesus here, but implied by everything else he said in his ministry. And that is for those times when we believe we simply cannot forgive and are locked in that place of “little ease,” even though we know how good and gracious God has been to us, and how many times we have ourselves been forgiven, our slates wiped clean, and we’ve been given the opportunity to start anew – for those times, when we can make in our heads a conscious connection between what God has done for us and what we then are supposed to do for others, but simply cannot make the connection in our hearts– the hurt is too great; the sense of injustice too strong; for those times when it is beyond our human ability to forgive, then in Act Four we can pray. We can pray that the time will come when we can forgive. And if we are not yet ready even to pray that prayer, then we can be honest with God in confessing that we cannot. And I believe God will hear that prayer, and the dimensions of the room of Little Ease will expand slightly with our confession of helplessness and our plea for divine intervention.<sup>3</sup>

And as we make this prayer, we must remember that to forgive is not to deny the pain or the wrongness of an act; to forgive is not to excuse that which is unjust or cruel. To forgive is to make a conscious choice to be unbound and unfettered by that evil that has been done to us. Joanna Adams, pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, writes that in church we sing or say during the Lord’s Supper, “Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.” We translate that as “Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.” But the word “eleison” in Greek literally means “to unbind.” We are asking God to unbind us from all that keeps us imprisoned.

Like other spiritual disciplines, forgiveness is a practice – a commitment to be renewed each day throughout our lives. It is not a single action or a multiple thereof; that’s why Jesus can’t give Peter a quantitative answer. Forgiveness is a way of life that comes from a deepening relationship with God and with others. It is an ongoing process of unbinding ourselves from the anger and hurt that separates us from one another, and a re-binding of ourselves to one another in bonds of love and grace, stronger than those that had kept us apart. And perhaps this is Act Five, living together, shaped by these practices, experiencing again and anew what it means to be forgiven and to forgive. The drama is not over; the play goes on. Thanks be to God. Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Once More From the Heart,” *The Seeds of Heaven*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Charles, “Twice Blest,” September, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett Keizer, *Christian Century*, 31 July 2002, p. 23.