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# A Parable of Forgiveness

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A Sermon By  
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Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2017-09-17-AAA.mp3>.

## A Parable on Forgiveness

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The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 17, 2017

Exodus 14:19-31  
Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12  
Matthew 18:21-35

New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine notes, “Jesus told parables because they serve as keys that can unlock the mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions: how to live in community; how to determine what ultimately matters; how to live the life that God wants us to live. They are Jesus’ way of teaching, and they are remembered to this day not simply because they are in the Christian canon, but because they continue to provoke, challenge, and inspire.” The parable we hear in today’s Gospel is no exception.

Jesus uses the parable to help illustrate his initial response to a question about forgiveness asked by Peter. “How often should I forgive?” (Matt. 19:21b) Peter asks Jesus. Peter wants to determine how wide his capacity for forgiveness should be. How many times can he be slighted before he says enough? How long before the reservoir of grace can be exhausted. It’s a good question. We know too well both the small and large ways that others can tread upon us. So, at what point do we say, “Enough?”

Peter begins by establishing what he and we might consider a rather high bar of forgiveness, a significant concession to those who might hurt us. Should I forgive someone as many as seven times? That seems generous. After all, aren’t second (let alone seventh!) chances exceedingly rare in our lives? But Jesus, as he often does, poses a radical suggestion: not seven but seventy-seven times are we to forgive. Of course, what Jesus is suggesting is not a larger ledger upon which we can keep track of offenses. He’s not merely requiring an additional number of gracious acts. Instead, he is suggesting there is no need for a ledger whatsoever. Jesus suggests that forgiveness is a deep reservoir of grace that should never run dry.

To further illustrate his point Jesus tells a parable, which we frequently call, “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.” In this particular parable, Jesus tells of a king settling debts with his servants. One of these servants owes his king a massive financial obligation, a debt too great ever to be repaid. And so the king decrees that the nameless debtor and his family ought to be sold in order to pay the debt. If he will not receive the amount due, at least the king can receive some compensation in exchange for the slave’s labors. The debtor begs for more time, more patience but receives something unexpected instead: a wholesale remission of his debts. The now liberated servant leaves with a whole new life available to him. However, in short order, he shifts from servant to lord when he encounters one of his fellow slaves. The king’s servant demands that a relatively smaller debt be fulfilled immediately. Unable to pay, the slave is thrown in jail. Once the king hears of his servant’s callous reaction, he is livid. The servant who was shown mercy, should also in turn, have shown mercy to others in his debt.

This parable seems to say that forgiveness is neither optional nor contingent. Because God’s forgiveness knows no end, so also should our relationships be governed by a grace that knows no bounds. In this parable, indeed in this entire discourse, Jesus upends the basic structure of how we tend to negotiate forgiveness. His teaching challenges our understanding. It provokes us and it should inspire and move us to reflection.

If Jesus' message of forgiveness challenges you, that's good! If you hear this gospel and you squirm a little bit, you're paying attention. This message is meant to challenge. It is also meant to inspire thoughtful reflection and eventually, action. For me, Jesus' teaching sets in motion memories of people I was reluctant to forgive. It sets in motion thoughts of people waiting for my forgiveness. It sets in motion reminders of people whom I don't think I can ever forgive. And Jesus' teaching forces me to ask myself some difficult questions. What is holding me back? What am I expecting to make my forgiveness more palatable?

Jesus doesn't offer answers to these questions. Jesus doesn't provide us with a magic formula to determine what forgiveness should look like or feel like. He doesn't hand us a map or blueprint. What he gives us is a mandate. Forgive as you have been forgiven. I believe Jesus speaks to the necessity of forgiveness because he knows the effects of unforgiveness. There are so many situations in our lives that, when not dealt with, sow seeds of bitterness that can fester into deep, painful wounds. It is widely known that unforgiveness, or holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply affects our emotional and physical health. So what Jesus says, makes sense. But that doesn't make it any easier to practice.

Because, what about those wrongs which are unforgivable? And there are many. What about the evils and harms committed that damage, abuse, and deny the dignity of human beings in horrific ways? What about the Holocaust, slavery, exploitation of vulnerable populations, the mistreatment of others, infidelity, lies, abuse, betrayal? I am not sure what to do with these given Jesus' words.

But perhaps it's enough, at least for now, that Jesus makes us think again about the purpose of forgiveness in our lives. Perhaps it's enough, at least for now, to reflect on the discomfort and complexity of Jesus' words. After all, that is why Jesus taught in parables. The purpose of a parable is to prompt its hearers to look at the world in a different way. Parables provoke, refine, confront, and disturb. Let's let this parable do its work.

I invite you to reflect on Jesus challenging words this morning. Words in which Jesus calls us beyond our comfort zones. Words which confront us. Jesus challenges us, time and time again. He asks us to be like him and to be like his Father in Heaven. He invites us to forgive, not just because we should, not just because it may bring us peace. Jesus invites us to forgive because Jesus' mission was to bring about a new way of life, a new way of being in this world. Forgiveness, reconciliation, right relationship with others is a major part of that mission. It's not easy, it doesn't always make sense, but it's Jesus' way. It's the way of the Kingdom of God. We don't have to understand, but we have to be willing to at least consider what it might mean to live this way. To follow Jesus. To forgive as we have been forgiven. As followers of Christ, we have to be willing, like Peter, to raise the questions and to hear the hard answers. And by God's grace, may we be willing to try and live like Jesus wants us to live. For that is our call. That is our mission. Amen.