

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses... ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” ²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times. ²³ “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused, and went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive another from your heart.”

Response to the Word

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

P: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 18:15-16, 20-35

09/17/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“A Prison of Our Own Making”

Rev. Amy Terhune

I’d like to open this morning with a Hollywood classic. This is the late Rex Harrison as professor Henry Higgins from *My Fair Lady*, after learning that his protégé Eliza Doolittle is considering marriage to someone else.

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“I’m a most forgiving man...but...” How human he is. We don’t like to admit, but we’ve all done what he’s doing in our minds. How easy it is to see another’s faults while overlooking his own! How confused he is by his own feelings, when Eliza Doolittle claims she’ll marry another man. If we’re really living at all, we have been hurt and we have hurt others. This is the human reality of relationships. This is the human reality of sin and brokenness. “I’m a most forgiving man...but...”

In today’s lesson, Jesus offers practical, plain-spoken advice for those in conflict. Because conflict is unavoidable. But it doesn’t have to be destructive. It can be productive. It can lead us to greater wisdom and deeper love for another. As the lesson opens, Jesus speaks to those who have

been hurt. When someone sins against you, he begins, go. That's disconcerting. He makes it clear that that we are the ones responsible for initiating reconciliation—which is completely understandable if we're the one who started the problem in the first place. In that case, the right and obvious thing to do, once we've cooled down, is go to the other and apologize. But that isn't what Jesus says here. He says, "if another member of the church sins against you..." In other words, we are the injured party. We are the ones who have, in some way, suffered as a result of another's choices. They started it. It's hardly fair, then, that the responsibility to fix it should fall to us. But it does. Why? Because relationship matters more than who is right and who is wrong. Which we know...intellectually. It's all well and good for me to say that on Sunday morning. But come Monday morning, when the rubber hits the road, you know as I know that this is one of the hardest things we'll ever do. To risk reaching out to those who hurt us – that's hard. To say I'm sorry to those we hurt, and mean it, and change. That takes an inner strength that buckles the knees, if we're honest.

And Peter knows it. Lord, how many times should I forgive? And Jesus... maybe he sits down, looks Peter in the eyes. Maybe he sucks in a deep breath, sets aside his frustration and tries to think how to explain that forgiveness isn't about math. It's about not counting. It's a mindset, a choice, a witness, a discipline in faith. And so he tells this parable, the point being that if we start with how many times we've been forgiven instead of how many times we are called upon to forgive, things shift. We'll never have to forgive another as much as God has forgiven us. To illustrate his point, Jesus tells us about a servant who owes a king ten thousand talents. How much is that?

Here's what Bill Ritter says: "It's a ridiculous amount. I feel sorry for people who read everything in the Bible with lockjaw literalism. For they miss the fact that sometimes (in order to make a good story better), even Jesus says things that are totally off the wall. This is one of them. Ten thousand talents is an utterly ridiculous amount. No one could ever repay that much. And it's unlikely anyone would ever owe that much. The entire personal fortune of King Herod was said to be only 900 talents. And the combined tax base of Galilee and Peraea (during the time of Jesus) was only 200 talents. The word for 10,000 ("muriun") represents the largest figure used in reckoning accounts. Jesus is saying that the debt is not only staggering, but laughably so. [adapted from "On Transforming Sows' Ears" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.] In today's economy we'd be talking many, many times what our national debt is right now—an astronomical number.

And yet, the servant falls on his face and pleads, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything!' Which is laughable. Any king in his right mind would scoff. What? You? Pay that? It's ludicrous. Well, we're that servant. The debt we owe for the cost of our sin is a ridiculous sum. We can't pay it. We'll never be able to pay it. It isn't possible. Fortunately, the King hears our desperate plea and doesn't laugh or scoff. Instead, he forgives us the debt. He writes it off the books. Which is good news.

"So what do we do with such good news? We let it spill over onto the next person we meet. Right? Not always ... or so the story says." [Bill Ritter, *ibid.*] The forgiven servant meets a comrade, who owes him about \$20, and who gives voice to the exact same line the forgiven servant just used on the king, only, he doesn't seem to recognize the words as his own! Instead, he demonstrates the attitude: that's not the way the world works! If you join the king in feeling furious with this forgiven servant, you should. We're meant to feel that way! We're meant to see how completely out of whack this is. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. We're expected to view our lives and every person we encounter in the light of the cross.

But let's deal with our human predicament candidly. The fact of the matter is: forgiveness is hard. Some people *like* to play the victim. If we forgive, we have to let go of the insult and injury that we have sustained. It puts us back on equal footing with the person who has hurt us. It means that no

one owes us anything anymore. Victims carry the hurt and suffering around as a badge. Victimization is a poor way to make oneself feel special—especially when God has already proven how special we are by dying for us.

But even for most of us who prefer not to be victims, forgiveness is hard. If we've been hurt, anger is justifiable. If we've witnessed hurt, anger is natural. In fact, there are times when we should be angry. Even Jesus turned over tables in the temple when he witnessed the exploitation and rampant greed of temple leadership against common folks coming to worship. He lambasted religious leadership for their failures. And they killed him for it. And yet, as he hung there on the cross, what does he pray? Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. How does such a prayer cross the lips of a crucified man?

Because it's not about math. Forgiveness is not acquiescence to evil. To forgive is not to forget. Few of us can truly forget hurt that happens to us. To forgive is not to condone or dismiss, as if the hurt and pain don't matter; as if evil can be excused. To forgive is not necessarily to pardon. A pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of their actions. Even God's grace does not necessarily save us from the consequences of our sin. And finally, to forgive is not to reconcile. We hope and pray and work for reconciliation, of course, but reconciliation takes two parties, and we have no control of the other who hurt us. I can't tell you how many times, over my years, I've counseled people whose siblings, or children, or parents, or lifelong friends have cut off the relationship. The agony in that is heart-wrenching, and time and again, I have to speak the hard words that we cannot make someone else repent or relate to us. Reconciliation is not us to us alone. But we can forgive. Forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense. [Adapted from Robert D. Enright, in Niki Denison, "To Live & Forget," *On Wisconsin* (November-December 1992) in illustrations for Matthew 18 on www.Sermons.com.] It is the power we have to determine our own character. Forgiveness is entirely independent of justice. It is about what will control our hearts. It's about who will we be in the world.

Jesus forgives because he won't be subject to anyone but God. Resentment poisons us. Refusing to forgive can destroy us, body and soul.

"A man who has shown us the capacity to forgive is Nelson Mandela of South Africa. On the day he was released from prison, he admits thinking to himself: 'They're letting me go, but everything that was important is taken from me. My cause is dead. My people suffer. My friends, my family – they have been put to death. Everything and everyone that means anything to me, they've taken away. It's all gone, and I hated them for it,'" said Nelson Mandela, "Then God spoke to me, reminding me of Jesus, and said to me, 'Nelson, for twenty-seven years you were their prisoner but you were always a free man. Don't let them set you free only to make you their prisoner'." [adapted from http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/campolo_4313.htm; as used in "A Difficult Day to Follow Jesus" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Mandela chose the life of forgiveness. He knew that we are not doomed to let any emotion control us. Unlike any other animal on this planet, human beings have a remarkable ability to override our baser instincts—instincts to hoard selfishly, to protect our own, to wreck vengeance. Make no mistake about this. Hard as it is, forgiveness is a choice. We do not have to carry around feelings of bitterness, resentment, anger. We do not have to remain captive to feelings that ultimately cause more harm than good. But forgiveness will not come naturally. It will come only when we will it to be. The ungrateful servant who cannot forgive, even though he's been forgiven, lives in a tortured prison of his own making. He is walled in and shackled by his own bitterness and scorn. Forgiveness is power. It's a choice. And here's a final bit of truth: it is a powerful witness to the grace of God in the world.

Ron Lee Davis, in his book, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, tells about a moment when God's remarkable spirit of forgiveness became real to him. His best friend Jim had been hit and killed while out riding a motorcycle. The driver of the car, Mr. Smith, simply hadn't seen Jim in time and had plowed right into him. As Ron drove to visit Jim's parents, he struggled mightily over the rage he felt towards Mr. Smith. He felt an agony in his soul wondering how Mr. Smith could have let this happen. So imagine how amazed he was to discover, upon arrival at Jim's home, that Jim's family felt only compassion for the man who had accidentally killed their son. In fact, the first question they asked when Ron walked through the door was, "Do you know how Mr. Smith is doing? We've been praying for him all night." [from Ron Lee Davis, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1984) pg. 13.]

They felt compassion because they could put themselves in Mr. Smith's shoes—driving down familiar roads, our minds on many things, our humanness—simple plain not seeing, not anticipating. They'd driven down many roads many times that way—facing exactly the same horrible potential. For Jim's parents, there was no number, where they reached their limit and said, "no, I can't forgive anymore." For them, it was about community. It was about faith. It was about compassion. It was not being in a prison of their own making, but having the freedom and power of God's grace to get outside of their own grief and imagine another's.

"There's a wonderful story about a church having its monthly business meeting. The treasury was in better shape than usual, so the chairperson asked if there were any special needs. One lady stood and said that she felt the church needed to get a chandelier.

"A penny-pinching trustee leapt to his feet and shouted, "I'm against it for three reasons. Number one, nobody knows how to spell it. Number two, nobody knows how to play it. And number three, what this church really needs is more light!" [from Loyal Jones and Billy Edd Wheeler, *Laughter in Appalachia* (New York: Ivy Books, 1987) pg. 26; as appearing in Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) pg. 137.]

What this church needs is more light. What this world needs is more light. And I seem to remember Jesus saying something to us about being that light, or at least reflecting His light. And that is the call of Christ on our lives. To not live in a prison of our own making. We can be light while holding onto those dark nights of the soul. They're real. And they're hard. And they hurt. You'll never hear me say they otherwise. What you'll hear me say is that God is bigger. God is stronger. If you dive into Lake Michigan, you expect to get wet. Water is wet, after all. So when we are immersed in God's grace, it's not unreasonable to expect that we are changed by the sheer magnitude of God's forgiveness. Every subsequent breath we take is in the ocean of grace. Grace powers us. Grace defines us. By its very definition, grace is not dependent on our choices, and it's not stuck in the past. Grace moves us through today and into tomorrow. Embrace it. For the hymn is true: We will go forth by grace alone. Amen.