

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 17, 2017

Genesis 50:15-21 • Psalm 103:1-13 • Romans 14:1-12 • Matthew 18:21-35

During the 1990s, there was a professor who taught at Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. And he would start the first day of class the same way every year. He would go to the library and check out the biggest, heaviest edition of the Hebrew Bible he could find. And he would drag it up to his classroom where all the students were. And while all the students were talking with one another, he would lift the book up and drop it. And it would land with a thud and the whole class would go silent. And then he would just stand there and stare at it for about thirty seconds. And then he would look up from the book very dramatically and ask a question. “Well, what does it say?” And the students would just sit there in silence. And after another long pause, this professor would say, “You’re exactly right. It doesn’t *say* anything. You have to *read* it.”

Whenever our readings focus on big topics like forgiveness, there’s often a temptation to ask, “Well, what does the Bible say about forgiveness?” To be sure, the Bible says a lot about forgiveness. Scripture is full of writing on forgiveness: who can do it, why it matters, what it asks of us. But it doesn’t speak with one voice. It doesn’t all say the same thing. Which means that we have to read it. We have to consider our own experiences, our own context, our own faith, to make sense of it. It’s probably a good thing that the Bible doesn’t have one singular teaching on forgiveness because we don’t have one singular experience of it. There is a big difference, for example, between what it means to forgive an unrepentant abuser and what it means to forgive someone who makes an unkind remark and then calls you the next day to apologize. There’s a big difference between how we pursue forgiveness in our personal relationships and how we pursue it in our civic life. And there’s a big difference between saying you’ll forgive someone and taking on all of the hard work that process actually entails. Today’s gospel reading is another little brushstroke, another bit of color in the bigger picture that scripture paints of forgiveness.

In last week’s reading, Jesus and the disciples had a conversation about conflict in the church. About the possibility of forgiveness and Jesus’s promise to be present among us. In today’s gospel reading, Peter asks the question that many of us have been thinking. “Lord,” Peter asks, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” What Peter wants, what many of us want, is to know what the minimum is that I have to do to be okay. According to many Jewish teachers, if someone sinned against you, you were supposed to offer them forgiveness three times. And after you offered them forgiveness three times, if they didn’t see what they did as wrong, if they didn’t show any remorse or repentance, then you could move on. If you try three times and the person still doesn’t want to pursue forgiveness, the problem isn’t you.

Obviously, none of us like being slighted or taken advantage of or snubbed or whatever. But if you are, if you get stood up, if someone makes an unkind remark, if someone mistreats you, then there are certainly times when deep down, part of us hopes that the other person doesn’t want forgiveness. Where we hope that they’ll keep doing what they’re doing. Maybe that’s because it confirms what we always thought about them. Maybe that’s because their stubbornness gives us a legitimate reason to dislike them when we really didn’t have one before. Maybe it’s because it lets us go to our friends and say, “You wouldn’t believe what this person did this time...” The experience of being wronged is bad, but once you’ve been wronged, you might as well make the most out of it.

So it’s tempting to turn the question of forgiveness into a matter of accounting. Where you keep track of how many times you’ve been slighted and how many times you’ve tried to make it better. And many of us do this in our heads. When we make an unkind remark about someone, we think *Well, they said something uncharitable about me last year. So I guess we’re even now.* Or when someone

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cancels on us at the very last minute, we think *That was rude. But now I have a freebie if I ever need one.* Do I owe someone something or do they owe me? Who's getting ahead?

And this tendency seems familiar to Peter. When Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that they should forgive, Peter is already looking for the magic number. "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Three is what's recommended, so let's up it to seven. Seven seems generous. That seems like a good faith effort.

Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." If you want to get the gist of Jesus's reply, you can imagine him snapping his fingers in Peter's face and saying, "Hey, stop counting. There's no magic number." Jesus says that there's no minimum number of times you have to try to forgive before you can write the other person off. That you have to stay open to the possibility that they're going to change.

So in today's gospel, instead of telling Peter how to forgive, Jesus offers a parable. This is a fun parable because it's intended as satire. The setup is that there's a king who needs to settle up debts with his servants. So he calls in one of the servants and checks how much he owes. And the servant owes ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents is a lot of money. It's hard to get an exact number, and you don't want to kill the joke by doing all the math, but the guy owes something like four billion dollars. How could he possibly owe so much money? We don't know. Why didn't the king notice when he loaned him something like, I don't know, three billion dollars? It's unclear. But he owes four billion dollars.

And when the king asks for the four billion dollars, you can imagine the servant doing that little thing when you check your pockets. Like maybe I left a quarter somewhere. But he doesn't have four billion dollars on him. So the king thinks about selling the servant to someone else to try to get some of the money back, but the servant says, "No, no, no. I have a better idea. I'll work for the money and then I can pay you back." This sounds good, except that it would take him about 150,000 years to pay off that debt. So there's no way that this is going to work.

So eventually the king realizes that there's no way to get the money back. So he forgives the debt and lets him go. So this guy has made out exceedingly well. The reasonable thing for this guy to do is to pay it forward, right? There's no way this guy can pay forward four billion dollars, but you think he might make a little gesture that way or something, right? But no. While this guy is going home he sees another servant who owes him money. A tiny little fraction of what he'd been forgiven. And he goes up to him, grabs him by the throat, and says "Where's the money you owe me?" And the guy says he doesn't have it. So the servant drops him on the ground and puts him into debtor's prison.

Now if you're keeping score, if forgiveness is a game of accounting, then the servant who had the great debt forgiven came out ahead. Not only did he have that four billion dollars forgiven, but he also got that twenty bucks back. *Nice.*

But from the perspective of Jesus, from our perspective, this guy doesn't just make you outraged or angry. But you actually feel a sense of pity. You actually kind of feel bad for him. This guy should be the happiest guy in the world, should be having a kind of George Bailey/*It's a Wonderful Life* moment, but instead he's still trying to figure out how he can get ahead. He's been forgiven an impossibly large debt. And it hasn't changed anything.

The parable Jesus tells ends with the servant being brought back in by the king and thrown in prison until he can pay what he owes. It's a rather harsh ending to the parable. But what Matthew's Jesus is trying to tell us isn't that God punishes people who don't forgive. God's forgiveness isn't contingent on anything. It doesn't depend on you forgiving. It's that in choosing

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not to forgive, nothing has changed about this man's life. Even if this servant is totally free from his debt, he really isn't free at all.

Forgiveness changes the people who receive mercy. If you've ever been forgiven, you know this. When someone forgives you, it feels like a huge weight has been lifted off of your shoulders. Like you can be yourself again with that person, not having to worry about when they're going to bring up that thing you did. But forgiveness also changes the people who forgive. When you forgive someone, you give them a gift. But you also end up receiving something in the process. That's why Jesus told Peter that there's no magic number, no minimum number of times you should forgive someone. That you should stay open to the possibilities. Because if you cut yourself off from other people, if you consider them irredeemable lost causes, you miss the possibility that they could change. That you would miss out on the new life that offering forgiveness brings you.

It's tempting to try to win the past the way the servant did. You can win the estranged relationship. You can win the breakup. You can rack up as many wins in the past as you want. But, Jesus says, there's no new life there. Jesus's command to forgive without end isn't saying you should let people take advantage of you. It isn't saying you should put yourself in harm's way. It isn't saying things need to go back to the way they were. No, Jesus is telling Peter and all of us not be like the servant in the story, who is so focused on winning the past that he can't see the new future the king's mercy created.

That new future isn't always readily apparent. Sometimes it shows up immediately, but other times it shows up much later. But stay open, Jesus says. Because you never know when that will happen. Most times you will only have to offer forgiveness one time. Other times you will have to offer seventy-seven times. And every once in a while, it will take seventy-seven times plus one. Thanks be to God for what that plus one can bring.

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