

Rev. Seth D Jones

Lord's Prayer series -- "Forgive us our debts..." – Matt 18:21-35; Ex 14:19-31

"Forgiveness and Freedom"

For centuries, the culture surrounding Jesus righted wrongs within by extending the rule of *lex talionis*, "eye for an eye", or the "law of retaliation" upon the sons of the sons of the offender. Jesus upends the whole thing by saying the punishments should be measured out through forgiveness, not revenge.

In Genesis 4:23-24, Lamech tells his wives, "*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times (Gen 4:15), then Lamech seventy-seven times.*" To be clear, the "law of retaliation" was foundational to most common law of the time throughout the Middle East and we even see its existence strongly in America. Tort law is founded on the economic equivalent of this. Restitution to victims of crimes, the death penalty and the occasional vigilante justice that gets acted out in the US are all examples that '*the law of the claw*' is alive and well today. It is the law of revenge and vengeance. It is the law of equal measure. We want justice and we want the wrong-doers to pay and pay mightily based on what we determine to be equal to the crime.

In an honor and shame culture like the one Jesus lived in, the responsibility of fulfilling the *lex talionis* fell to the family and community. If they were shamed by an action, the family could only regain honor by exacting an equal punishment upon the offender. In our society, we operate in a more success/failure culture. Justice can be handed over to the "proper" authorities and the social institutions determine the appropriate punishment for the failure of the person to live by the successful examples of the society. "They must pay" we say. "Our honor must be restored" is what the people of Jesus' time would say.

But whether we are dealing with honor and shame or success and failure, both of which are social constructs, not moral judgments, neither system has much room for radical forgiveness. Many bibles translate Jesus' proscription to be "*seventy-times-seven times*", or at least 490 times. In other words, we forgive the one who has wronged us over and over and over and over again. The number, of course, is not meant to be exact. The more correct translation, particularly in Greek, would be "*a really, really massive number of times.*" Or, if you are numerologically inclined, 7 is the number of completion and wholeness. Jesus is saying that our reconciliation and restoration of wholeness with our neighbor is not restored until you have multiplied the wholeness and reconciliation 70 times over. Or as John Wesley might have said, "*Perfect your perfection until you can no longer perfect it anymore.*"

Because we share in the reality of Jesus Christ, it is an expectation of God's children to fulfill and act in

these forgiving ways with one another. Further, as a church, it is our responsibility to provide the nest, the foundation, the safe haven, for these acts of forgiveness to happen – with ourselves and also within our families and communities. Or more appropriately, we provide the space for the Holy Spirit to work among us.

Really, forgiveness is the work of *transformation*. We are not seeking to simply reform our behavior, or our situation. We are not seeking to “make it better”, even though this may be a direct outcome of our participation in the work of reconciliation, forgiveness and healing that Jesus leads us in. We are seeking to live in the promise of the kingdom of God that Jesus promises. “*Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors*” is a statement of seeking to follow Jesus. It is a statement of promise that tries to answer, “*What does a life that follows Jesus look like?*” “*What does a community that follows Jesus look like?*” “*What does a world that looks to Christ look like?*”

Our readings today seek to tie what forgiveness and the Kingdom of God look like to the freeing of the Hebrews from Pharaoh. The story is the parting of the Red Sea. The sea closes in over the pursuing armies of Pharaoh. “*That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant*” (Ex 14:29-31). Freedom has its costs. In this case, the cost is paid by the pursuing Egyptian army. And it is paid by 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

By tying these two stories together – the Exodus story and the story of the Unfaithful Servant in Matthew – we see that forgiveness, particularly God’s forgiveness, frees us, and that our freedom is intimately tied to our capacity and ability to forgive.

This whole discussion in Matthew begins with Jesus answering the question “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” Jesus’ answer is to become like a little child. But if you cause one of those children, one of those who live in the restored innocence of forgiveness, stumble or cause them to fall and sin, then it might be better to tie a millstone around your neck and be thrown into the deep sea (Mt 18:1-6). It is only in reconciliation and forgiveness that we see with the eyes of a child.

Forgiveness, then, in Jesus’ view, is an act of innocence, an act of trust in God. Forgiveness requires that we place ourselves in the midst of great difficulty. The king in our story today takes seriously the debt he is owed by the servant. “Ten thousand talents” is the equivalent of about 2.03 billion dollars in today’s money.

Matthew’s intent is to speak of the vast extravagance of God’s mercy. The king cancels the debt completely. The accounting tables are erased and balanced in a single command. But what does the servant do

when he is owed a few denarii, or the equivalent of a few dollars in our day? He throttles the poor man and sends him into debtors' prison to be tortured and forced to repay. Which forces the king to enact the same punishment upon the servant. The lesson of forgiveness and its memory of freedom from debt is easily forgotten. The servant pays the price. He does not allow himself to see with the eyes of a child, with the eyes of forgiveness of debts just as his debt has been forgiven.

The eyes of a child are in awe of the freedom that God gives us. The eyes of a child are surprised continually by the forgiveness that Jesus gives us. And because of what God and Jesus have given us, we are in a position to give the great gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the gift we bring to others as God's loved and saved children. It is what WE offer to others for what we have been given. When we do not forgive, we perpetuate the suffering and pain that caused our need to forgive in the first place. That, I think, is why Jesus says, *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother and sister from the heart."* Remember, the heart is the seat of the will and discernment in the Middle East and Greece at this time, so forgiveness is an act of the will. An uncompromising act of the will.

But what does that act of forgiveness look like? Jesus tells us what it looks like. He declares in Luke 4:18-19 the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee is the cancellation of all debts and accounts. It is the return of all land to those whom have lost it because of debt, slavery or financial ruin. The prisoners are freed. The blind are given their sight. The poor receive good news. (Lev 25:8-55). Jesus intends the Jubilee to be permanent. This is what we pray for when we say, *"Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Some of you may say "debts" rather than "trespasses". Both come to the same meaning in Jesus' understanding. Telford Work, a Pentecostal theologian, in his book *Ain't Too Proud To Beg* – a book I bought for the title alone, since it is named after a Rolling Stones song- reflects on the Lord's Prayer. He says this about that phrase that we pray. *Read pg 158-9...*

But again, what does forgiveness in the way of Christ look like? Maybe it looks like Rev. Roy Ratcliffe, a Baptist minister who was shunned by his community, lost over half of his church and sustained a hailstorm of hate mail for a singular, radical act of forgiveness. Rev. Ratcliffe stepped in where no one else would. He started visiting a Supermax prison and talking with a particular inmate. This inmate had actually called him. He had begun to seriously consider all the things he had done wrong in his life. He began to worry about the state of his soul. Or so the story goes. One never knows with prison conversions. But this particular prisoner was a lifer, so he had no ulterior motive or need to convert. Rev. Ratcliffe was skeptical himself and met with this person for several months before being convinced that he was serious about baptism and conversion. And so, in 1994, Jeffrey

Dahmer, the notorious Milwaukee serial killer was baptized in a tub at a prison in Wisconsin by Rev. Roy Ratcliffe. He forgave where no one else could or would. Is that what forgiveness looks like? Pretty extreme, kind of like forgiving several \$100 million in debts.

Or maybe forgiveness looks like the statement, "*Do not think evil of this man.*" This was spoken by the grandfather of two of five dead girls at West Nickel Mines Amish School to several young people who were speaking with him, their elder, after the devastating shootings at the school by Charles Carl Roberts IV on October 2, 2006. The author of an article called "To Pasture" in the magazine *Cross-Currents*, points out that the Amish behavior of forgiving immediately, of setting up a support fund for the wife and children of Charles Roberts, of razing the school and planting over the site, of shutting out the media after a week of intense scrutiny "is not a denial of evil...but (it is) an injunction to rightly direct one's own attitudes and intentions" (Julia Kasdorf, *Cross Currents*, Fall 2007, pg 341.). It is an attempt to live into the Lord's Prayer directly and intentionally.

Or maybe "*forgiving our debts as we forgive our debtors*" looks like the king in our story today. "*The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*" It is outrageous and extreme, this sort of forgiveness. The freedom that comes to us, on either side of this equation – the forgiver or the forgiven – is overwhelming. We fall short often of fulfilling the call to forgive and accept forgiveness. It is a rare thing, quite frankly, in our world. Many of us may secretly relate to the servant who has been forgiven and then turns around and is unforgiving for the smallest of debts. How do we learn? We learn forgiveness by doing it and by asking for it. The only true source of forgiveness, of course, is God, and if we wish to learn it, we look to God first. We see what that forgiveness looks like by looking to Jesus again, and again, and again. Seven times seventy times. Over and over. Forgiveness is what Jesus does for us on the Cross. In Luke's version of the Crucifixion, Jesus says, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Lk 23:34). We don't know what we do. We learn forgiveness by seeking forgiveness and by forgiving one another, over and over again, seven times seventy times. May it be so for all of us, now and forever. Amen.