

Proper 19, Year A—Matthew 18
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All Saint's Episcopal Church, Russellville
Teri Daily

Forgiveness: Always an Act of Grace

What an incredible juxtaposition – every three years today's gospel reading on forgiveness comes the Sunday after the anniversary of what has come to be known simply as 9/11. Perhaps the close proximity between these readings and the remembrance of the more than three thousand persons who died that day nineteen years ago – holding these two things up simultaneously – highlights how difficult forgiveness can be.

Forgiveness is *hard*. And I'm not talking here just about the forgiveness of events on the scale of a national tragedy. We have all suffered hurts close to home that are hard to get past. Some of us have felt at one time or another betrayed by a partner or spouse, cheated out of an inheritance by another family member, judged unfairly when it came to a work evaluation or a test grade, ignored or deemed unimportant by the people we consider friends. And of course, this list is merely the beginning.

Why is forgiveness so hard? Perhaps one reason forgiveness is difficult is that we fail to name forgiveness as what it really is – an act of mercy, rather than a transaction of justice. We are trained to think in terms of what is fair, and so we think a wrong requires some sort of compensatory action to set it right – a payback if you will. I'll forgive you if you try to make things right, if you make amends. Now I'm not saying that acknowledging the wrong done, amending one's life, and making restitution where possible are not important -- they are. But if we wait for a wrong to be made right before we forgive, then forgiveness will never come. Because paying back a debt can't erase all the hurt that we've suffered, the loss of trust, the sense of betrayal. And besides, some debts are just downright unpayable; some wrongs are impossible to make right. No, in the final analysis, forgiveness is not ultimately about justice – forgiveness is always a matter of grace. That point is driven home by our gospel reading today.

Matthew compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who wants to settle all financial accounts with his slaves. After tallying the accounts, a servant who owed him ten thousand talents was brought before him. The servant couldn't pay the debt, and so he was ordered to be sold, along with his whole family and all his possessions. The man fell on his knees before his lord, and pleaded for mercy: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (Matthew 18:26). But Matthew tells us that "out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt" (Matthew 18:27).

What's important to know about this story is that ten thousand talents is a totally unrealistic, fantastic debt for this slave to owe – it is absolutely unpayable. One talent would have been equal to the wages earned for 15 years of manual labor. And ten thousand talents is a figure greater than the taxes paid by all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria.¹ It's impossible for the servant to pay back an amount so great. His only hope is mercy and, against all odds, mercy is what he gets. What this parable tells us is that forgiveness is not transaction of justice; it's not about what is "fair." Forgiveness is always an act of pure grace.

¹W. F. Albright, C.S. Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Series, Volume 26 (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

We often lose sight of this, and so we fall into the trap of thinking that we can somehow deserve or earn God's favor towards us – that if we live a good life, love other people, and follow the Ten Commandments (or at least some of them), God will love us and take care of us. That's just how the equation works. And so when we fall into sin, as we inevitably do, we think maybe we can make up for it. Do fifteen good deeds, twenty hours of community service, six consecutive weeks of making it to church on time. But the truth is that God's forgiveness is not something we earn – it's pure grace.

Acknowledging our inability to earn God's forgiveness is not a matter of perseverating on our sinfulness; instead, it is about naming as real the unlimited mercy of God. And when we focus on that abundant mercy that God has for us, we're much more able to extend that mercy to others as well. We see ourselves as those in need of mercy and forgiveness, standing alongside all of our brothers and sisters who are also in need of mercy and forgiveness. It's this relationship that lies at the root of our ability to forgive one another.

I'm reminded of a researcher who worked with Protestant and Catholic children in Ireland to promote forgiveness. The thought was that if the children of that country could learn to forgive past wrongs perpetrated by one side against the other, then maybe there could be peace there one day. As part of learning how to forgive, children were asked to think about a time when someone hurt their feelings or wasn't very nice to them. The children then put on a pair of glasses called forgiveness glasses and were asked to see things differently. Instead of seeing the wrong done, they were asked to see the person who did it. In other words, see the relationship, not just the action that was done. I think this is how Christians must approach forgiveness. We see each other as children of God, as brothers and sisters all standing before God – all loved and all in need of mercy. That image is the beginning of forgiveness.

While God does love all of us, I don't mean to suggest that our forgiveness of one another is always associated with feelings of love. Theologian Marjorie Suchocki defines forgiveness as simply wishing the well-being of the other person, wanting wholeness and healing for him or her. While seeing the person who has wronged us as a fellow child of God may not convert us to a cozy feeling of love, it *can* cultivate in us a desire for their well-being. It can shift the way we remember the past event and free us to live more fully into the future.²

After 9/11 happened, Osama bin Laden was called by some “the evil one.” One day a child came into a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Sunday School class where the children had been studying the parable of the Good Shepherd. In one of the gospels stories, the shepherd leaves the flock of ninety-nine sheep to go and search for the one sheep that is lost. It's a story of that one sheep's great worth, and of God's immense mercy and love. It's a story the children knew well. And so when that child in the Catechesis class called Osama bin Laden “the evil one”, her teacher simply said quietly, “Oh, then would you say that Osama bin Laden is a lost sheep?” Suddenly everything changed, because all the children knew that the story of the lost sheep is really also a story about them, about me, about you.

Seeing ourselves as children of God, as brothers and sisters standing together in need of the love and mercy of God, may well be the beginning of forgiveness. So, name as real the unlimited mercy of God, claim the forgiveness that's there for you, and then pass it on to others – knowing that the mercy that exists for you, belongs to them as well. That's how the kingdom of God spreads.

² Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Abacus, a poem by the Rev. Michael Coffey

There was the time you lied about the car crash
and the time I told you I didn't go to the corner bar
there was the time you let the cat out and she got crushed
and the time I let loose my tongue and spit venom
this is how we hurt each other: not in the act
but in the clinging and the trumpeting of wounds
and the holding on to justice like a rapier
sliding and clicking the abacus beads for each injury
from the coveting to the stealing and adultering
the killing, the lying, the false accusing and the rest
as if by keeping tally, and keeping a balance of accounts
we could make our offenses against each other fair
and we end not with balanced books, but endless debt
or we could stop the goddamned counting and winning
and see how the calculus of grace breaks the abacus
strings the beads into a polished necklace gifted to each other
with laughter and humility and freedom and zeroed lines³

³ Michael Coffey, "Abacus," *Ocotillo Pub*, <http://www.ocotillopub.org/search/label/forgiveness>, posted September 13, 2014.