

Pentecost XX – “On Forgiveness”  
Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35  
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That is unforgivable! Have you ever said these words?

Have you listened to the evening news . . . heard of children being trafficked, innocent people being bombed, corporations making impersonal decisions that affect persons . . . and said, “How unforgivable?” Have you answered the phone, listened to a friend’s heart-breaking story of distress and directed your anger at the cause of their woe . . . and said, “That is unforgivable?” Have you ever found yourself in a moment of prayer, admitting, God, I can’t forgive the person who betrayed me, the parent who failed me, or you, God, who have left me here in this mess?

Forgiveness is quite possibly the deepest challenge of being Christian. It is impossible to discuss without touching the wounded places of our lives, those places of hurt, outrage or injustice that make us cry, Unforgivable. And the questions of forgiveness – Can I forgive? Can this situation be reconciled? Does God forgive me? - hover within every worship service, summed up as we pray, *God forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Forgiveness, says Rowan Williams, “is not something finished. It is a gift, and a hope, and also a call.”<sup>1</sup> That call is what I’d like to focus us on today.

Peter, often the spokesperson for the disciples, comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord if someone sins against me, how many times I am expected to forgive them?” Jesus has been speaking about how to confront a fellow believer who acted wrongly, laying out a process of speaking with them directly, and then, if the first conversation doesn’t go well, bringing a fellow believer to attempt a second conversation. The aim is to facilitate a full airing of the situation, a speaking of truth in the service of reconciliation. Ever practical, Peter knows such efforts don’t always produce the hoped-for results. What if the sinner keeps sinning? How many times do I have to extend forgiveness? You and I can appreciate his need for clarification. After all, one can only accept so many “I’m sorry” without a corresponding change in behavior before it’s time to withdraw our out-stretched hand and move on.

Peter suggests what seems like a generous solution. How about offering forgiveness seven times? Seven represents the number of days in creation. It is a sacred number in his faith tradition. Peter might well be saying more than just a number, pushing himself toward a completeness. Let’s persist in offering absolution until we have given everything we have. Jesus’s reply – not seven times but seventy times seven – moves forgiveness away from any human calculation into the realm of infinity. Jesus says, stop counting. Forgiveness is not a transaction but a sacred sphere in which God moves. Forgiveness is about God’s movement toward us and how we might enact that divine gesture with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Rowan, “The Forgiveness of Sins” in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995), 53.

Those who protest – there is a limit to how much bad behavior we should tolerate - are correct. Every human being deserves respect, kindness, and the power to remove themselves from destructive situations. Absolutely. Jesus has already named the process by which sin is acknowledged, justice is sought, and a community supports one another in such restitution. This conversation about forgiveness does not negate that process but points toward something different. Forgiveness, it seems, is a sacred space in God's economy where things we cannot imagine are being healed, restored, and even, by God's grace, brought back together.

To explain Jesus tells a parable, an intentionally hyperbolic, exaggerated scenario of unpayable debts, a master who is both generous and harsh, and a servant muddling through it all. There was once a lord who presided over a kingdom, whose servant had mismanaged the property, livestock, or wealth entrusted to him, resulting in a debt of "ten thousand talents." To translate the servant owed his master the equivalence of 150,000 years of wages. The servant owned a ridiculously high sum that would be utterly impossible to repay. When the master calls the account due and the servant cannot fulfill the obligation, his first response is to reap some return on his investment by selling the servant, his wife, his children and possessions. It is an inhumane response to an impossible situation. Surprisingly, when the servant begs for mercy and promises eventual repayment, the master not only grants his release but also cancels his debt. We are given no insight into the master's actions. Is the master so wealthy that this impossibly high sum is of no consequence? Is the master overcome by an impulse of generosity, erasing a debt despite the high cost to himself? Does the master realize no punitive action, no matter how satisfying, would create the good kingdom desired?

In a fairytale, the servant who has been released from his debt would go out to extend his good fortune with others. He would replicate the master's actions. But in this parable, the servant, when placed in the master's position of collecting a debt owed to him, acts harshly. This time the debt is significantly smaller, but still large enough to sting, to make an impact if not repaid. The fellow servant also pleads for mercy, promises repayment. The servant withholds both time and release. Again, we the readers have no insight into his motives. Is he greedy? Is his memory that short? Does he see himself as worthy of mercy while everyone else has to adhere to the rules? For his unrelenting behavior, his master rescinds his original release, reinstates his debt, and applies the harshest punishment.

It's important, I believe, to not limit this parable to a moral example tale complete with a one-to-one correspondence in which the master is God and we are the unforgiving servants. Instead, let's allow the distinguishing marks of the story to speak about qualities often encountered when we contemplate forgiveness. Here we find a situation of high stakes – a series of high costs that feel either impossibly burdensome or impossible to relinquish. Here is the need for excessive mercy. Here is the joyful freedom of being released. Here is the hard, exacting work – that can feel so unjust – of letting someone off the hook. Jesus, I believe, intentionally creates a parable filled with impossible calculations and improbable decisions because forgiveness is not logical, often feels impossible, and ushers us into God's economy

where release, liberation, and the undoing of burdens for the well-being of all are the orders of the day.

As a pastor, I have never met anyone who is dis-interested in forgiveness, who doesn't have a wound of some sort that cries out for reconciliation. Into those vulnerable spaces, I want to offer two messages of encouragement.

First, the master grants the servant mercy, and it is mercy that the master chastises the servant for not extending to another. Mercy is the message. Our first task, writes David Lose, is to "simply bask in the unbelievable forgiveness, acceptance and grace that God offers to us, every day, and then, try, as much as we can, to live out of that mercy."<sup>2</sup> Let God's mercy speak to your life. Bask in God's mercy.

Second, I invite you to prayerfully ask God to show you where, and how, to extend forgiveness to another. Extend mercy, not because forgiveness is a transaction that might earn you something or rescue you from harsh consequences, but because the call of every Christian is to live into the forgiven, merciful world God has created and continues to create. When we enter, with hope and trust, into the hard work of forgiving we experience how God suffers for our wounds, how God provides a well-spring of love from which we can draw, and how forgiveness creates something impossibly, improbably, new. As I quoted at the beginning, forgiveness, says Rowan Williams said, "is never a possession. It is not something finished. It is a gift, a hope, and also a call." Hear that call today. Trust that with every call comes the grace to live into it, and extend mercy. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Lose, David, "Forgiveness and Possibility," <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>. Accessed 9/10/2020.