

Matthew 18:21-35

Aren't we glad we have Peter as one of the Apostles! We owe a great deal to Peter and his quick tongue. Again and again, the impetuous Peter rushes into speech. And Jesus responds with truth and wisdom that is immortal.

On this occasion, Peter thought he was being very generous. He asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his brother, and then answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times.

Peter's suggestion wasn't groundless. Rabbinic teaching, based on Hebrew Scripture (Amos), directed that a man must forgive his brother three times. A fourth offense was not to be forgiven. One wouldn't think of being more generous than God, so forgiveness was limited to three times.

Peter thought he was being generous and probably expected to be commended. But Jesus' answer was that the Christian must forgive seventy-seven times. In other words, there is to be no limit to forgiveness.

Jesus then told a story, a parable of the servant forgiven a great debt, who went out and dealt mercilessly with a fellow servant who owed him just a small fraction of what he himself had owed. And who, for his unforgiving lack of mercy, was himself condemned.

This parable teaches lessons which Jesus never tired of teaching his followers. First, it teaches a lesson which runs through all the New Testament: we must forgive in order to be forgiven. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples, the "Lord's Prayer" included the conditional petition to "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Mt 6:12).

No sooner had Jesus taught his disciples this prayer, than he went on to expand it, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses" (Mt 6:14-15). Forgiveness, both the giving and receiving of it, is reciprocal, one can't have it without doing it.

One of the great points in this parable is the contrast between the two debts owed. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents. In monetary terms, a talent was equal to about 15 years worth of wages for the typical unskilled worker. The king in our parable was owed 10,000 talents, or about 150,000 years of income. This works out to about 3,000 life sentences.

Obviously, no individual could ever repay such an amount. The man's resources would be meaningless, even if his entire family were sold into slavery.

What did the forgiven debtor make of the mercy shown to him? Apparently he learned nothing. The debt which a fellow servant owed him was insignificant in comparison, only

100 denarii. A denarius was a small silver coin that was roughly the daily wage for the typical worker.

So the second servant owed the first a hundred days of labor, no small amount but doable. The main servant's debt is 500,000 times greater than his fellow servant's debt! There's obviously more going on here than divine arithmetic.

The point of this parable is that God's mercy and forgiveness knows no bounds. And so, our relationships should be governed by grace that knows no bounds. In other words, forgiveness is a deep river of grace that should never run dry.

William A. Menninger has written: "The most authentic sign we can give ourselves that we have actually begun the process of forgiveness is our prayer. This is true even if the only prayer we can say is to ask to want to forgive. In the beginning it may be too much for us to even pray for the person who hurt us. Perhaps all we can do is pray for ourselves – to pray that for our own sake we may begin the process of forgiveness."

We remember the events of 2000 years ago, when God's own Son, Jesus Christ, surveying fields of broken lives and broken hearts, opened his arms upon the Cross and chose to call down from heaven God's forgiveness, not vengeance. And in this way, broke the cycle of violence, exemplifying God's compassionate love for all people.

And in this way, Jesus opened the possibility of a future marked not by judgement, but by mercy; not by calculation, but by trust; not by despair, but by hope; not by fear, but by courage; not by violence, but by healing; not by scarcity, but by abundance; not by hate, but by love; not by death, but by resurrection life.

That's what true forgiveness can do. May God give us the grace of forgiveness, to be the forgiven, forgiving people God calls us to be. And grant us the courage to walk, yes, even to run to the future that such forgiveness makes possible.

Amen.

Sources: William Barclay, 1975; Walter Brueggemann, 2014; David Lose, 2011, 2017; William Menninger, 2017; Synthesis, 2017; Eric Barreto, 2014; Karl Jacobson, 2011; Lionel Mitchell, 1985;