

Forgiven and Forgiving  
Psalm 130, Matthew 18:21-35, Matthew 5:7  
First Presbyterian Church  
February 11, 2018  
Beatitudes Series

Theme: In gratitude for being abundantly forgiven by God, we are able to forgive others in turn.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened,

they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Matthew 5:1-7

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

### Sermon

When we lived in Ames, Emma and Evie noticed a bird hopping around our backyard one day. One of its wings had gotten tangled in some plastic mesh and was pinned against its body. It couldn't fly... it could only hop around hoping to escape the notice of the dog. Ironically, just that morning the Ames Tribune had run an article about the wounded animal clinic out at the Iowa State vet school, so I called them. The very helpful person at the desk suggested we try to catch the bird, put it in a box and bring it on in. Not knowing exactly how to catch an injured bird, I asked. "Try using an old bed sheet or blanket," she said.

It was quite a sight - the girls and I running all over the backyard trying to throw a blanket over a scared, wounded bird. But after several tries, we succeeded... gingerly placed our little friend in a box... and headed off to the clinic where we assume she got excellent care. Of course, the bird had to be a girl.

On the trip home I was pondering our good deed... and wondering just how far our compassion might extend? To an injured bird or little bunny rabbit, yes. A wounded dog or a cat, sure. But I'm not so sure I would do the same for a distressed rattlesnake or injured mama bear. My compassion has limits. My mercy extends only so far.<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand years ago... in the original school of Christian discipleship... a student named Peter was trying hard to rise to the top of his class. He noticed his teacher was always talking about forgiveness... that time and time again, Jesus emphasized how important forgiveness was in the Reign of God: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "When someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one, as well." And to his credit, Peter got it. He understood that grace and mercy needed to replace the hatred and vengeance in his heart. But that didn't mean he had to like it! So, one day he just up and asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive a sister or brother who had sinned against him.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Cameron, *Unexpected Blessing*, p.115

Once? Twice? Maybe three times as was the Jewish custom? Nah, wanting please the teacher... always willing to do the extra credit assignment, Peter answered his own question: "As many as seven times?"

The Teacher clearly had something else in mind. Whether his answer was "77 times" or 70 times seven" it makes no difference... because for Jesus, forgiveness was not something you quantify... you know, do it these many times and you're good! Forgiveness was a qualitative thing... a way of being... an approach to life and others that finds its source and power in the very character of God whose nature is to be full of steadfast love and mercy. "As far as the east is from the west," the Psalmist writes, (how do you quantify that?), "so far does God remove our transgressions from us." Mercy is not a single thought or feeling or act... it's a way of life which flows from an ever-deepening friendship with God.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, this was a difficult concept for a "rules-oriented guy" like Peter, so just to make sure he understood, Jesus told him a story. Scene 1 finds a businessman wanting to settle his affairs... balance the books... to put things in order. So, he calls in all his accounts receivable... forecloses on all his outstanding mortgages... and among the many who owed him money, was this one fellow who was in for something like a bazillion dollars. We're talking big money here. Of course, there is no way to pay it all back; what with a wife and kids and all. So, the overextended homeowner does the only thing he knows to do – he begs. Right there in the lobby in front of everybody, he gets down on hands and knees and begs for mercy. And to everyone's complete surprise, the businessman gives it to him in spades... completely wiping the man's debt off his books.

Scene 2 finds this now forgiven debtor leaving the businessman's building and immediately meeting a guy who just the week before had borrowed twenty bucks to get his daughter some medicine. And remembering how grateful he is to be forgiven his bazillion dollar debt, he gladly does the same for this guy's \$20 debt, right? Right... and pigs fly, and Elvis is alive! No, he grabs the guy by the throat, hires a barracuda for a lawyer, and has him thrown into jail. The onlookers can't believe their eyes. How could this guy come floating out on a river of mercy only to shut off the water to his own debtor? Which is why in Scene 3 there is some satisfaction to hear what happens when the boss hears what happened. He calls him in and reads him the riot act: "You wicked slave, you! Look how much I forgave you! Could you not also forgive? Whatever happened to compassion? Whatever happened to mercy?" And after dressing him down, the businessman hands the guy over to his goons and the torture begins.<sup>3</sup> And we (like the disciples) think to ourselves. "Good!" He gets what he deserved! But then Jesus turns the parable around so that it faces us... and it no longer sounds so good. "So also, will my heavenly Father do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Pendleton Jones in "Forgiven and Forgiving," *Christian Century*, August 25-September 1, 1999, p.801.

<sup>3</sup> This "incarnational translation" is adapted from William H. Willimon's sermon, "Our Kind of Crowd," published in *Journal for Preachers*,

Friends, my sense is that we are like Peter in that we understand that somehow forgiveness lies at the very heart of the Christian life. In fact, a college professor reports that whenever she asks her undergrad religion students what they believe to be the most important part of the Christian message, without fail they say it is forgiveness. Jesus embodies God's mercy toward us, they say... which is why we should show that same mercy to others. "Forgive us our debts even as we forgive our debtors" - we say it every Sunday morning... because mercy... forgiveness... is at the heart of the Christian life...

Yet, how hard it is! The **importance** of showing mercy to others is matched only by the **difficulty** of showing mercy to others. No doubt you remember *The Hiding Place...* the autobiography written by Nazi prison camp survivor, Corrie Ten Boom. In her book, she tells of a time shortly after the war when she had gone to preach in Munich. Her theme that day was forgiveness... a topic she was clearly qualified to speak about. Well, after the service she left the pulpit and came down to the center of the sanctuary where she noticed a man in a gray overcoat approaching her, his hand extended. She recognized him as the particularly sadistic chief guard in the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she and her sister had been incarcerated and where her sister had died. The guard's face was beaming that night after the church service. "Oh, Fraulein," he said, "how grateful I am for your powerful message. To think that Jesus washed my sins away."

Corrie Ten Boom was stunned... and found herself paralyzed as the guard's outstretched hand hung in the air. She literally could not raise her hand to meet his. She writes, "Even as the vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them... and yet I could do nothing about it. I could not feel even the slightest spark of love or charity. And so, I breathed this silent prayer. 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him, please give me your forgiveness.'" And with that prayer she was able to lift her hand and touch the man who had persecuted her. "From my shoulder," she writes, "along my arm and through my hand passed a current from me to him... and in that moment I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing depends, the world's healing depends upon God. When our Lord tells us to love our enemies, he gives us, along with the command to do it, the love itself."<sup>4</sup>

Experiences like this, though quite dramatic, are not unlike experiences that you have had when you have suffered wounds at the hands and words and actions of others. And because of that, I never want to speak of forgiveness lightly. There is a reason that undergrad religion students find Jesus' forgiveness THE CENTRAL MESSAGE of the gospel... there is a reason that over the years the sermons I have preached on forgiveness have led to so many deep and heartfelt conversations. The importance of showing mercy to others is matched only by the difficulty of showing mercy to others.

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<sup>4</sup> Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 238.

So, with that said, allow me to repeat one thing and say one thing more. To repeat – the “merciful” are people who show kindness to others... people who are more eager to forgive than to punish... people who are more ready to show compassion than to exact their due. Living close to the heart of God, the “merciful” are not intrinsically good people... forgiving does not somehow come more naturally to them than to others. And forgiveness is not simply an act of human will - most folks I know can’t make themselves forgive someone no matter how hard they try. But living near to the heart of God the merciful are humble and poor in spirit... they know just how far short they fall and how much they stand in need of God’s mercy. And once we know how merciful God is toward us... we are freed to be merciful toward others... we are freed to forgive even as we have been forgiven. This is a gift of God’s grace, my friends... it is a gift inspired by the Holy Spirit working inside of us to make the spiritual connection between our own dependence on God’s mercy and the mercy you extend to others. And even if this morning you cannot forgive someone, you can pray that there will be a time that you can... you can pray that Jesus will give you the power of his forgiveness.

Finally, this. Contrary to what you may have heard, forgiving does not require forgetting. Let me say that again: forgiving does not involve a literal forgetting. Instead, Christian forgiving means **remembering**, but doing so graciously.”<sup>5</sup> We cannot forget the injustices and wounds that others have visited upon us... others cannot forget what we have done to them... for most of us, it’s just not possible. What IS POSSIBLE is seeing these wounds through the eyes of grace. What IS POSSIBLE is remembering our deep hurts without contempt for the one who hurt us. What IS POSSIBLE is the kind of forgiveness that does not ignore the injustices done, but for the sake of peace... peace of mind, and peace of heart, remembers them graciously. Near to the heart of God we may not be able to forget. But that’s not the point anyway. Forgiving is the point... showing mercy is the point. This is what blessing looks like, Jesus says... that you receive the mercy I offer you... and with gratitude offer that same mercy to others.

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte VanOyen Witvliet of Hope College as quoted by Jon Walton