



Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Ten years ago, when I was finalizing plans for my ordination worship service, I made a mistake in my preparations that affected a friend of mine. When I realized what I'd done, I owned up to it, apologized for it, and corrected the mistake. And instead of forgiving me right away like I hoped she would, she got really angry.

And a couple of months later, she walked away from our friendship. I was upset that our friendship had ended that way, but at the same time, I had made the mistake and the choice to forgive was hers.

Not quite *two* years ago, she sent me an email right after my brother died - a mutual friend of ours had told her what had happened. And she wrote, "I'm so sorry that you lost your brother. We lost my sister suddenly and unexpectedly right before Thanksgiving. So I know exactly what you're going through. I'm praying for you. Please pray for me, too."

Our friendship isn't the same as it was before, but she has forgiven me and we *are* friends again.

If all of you were sitting in front of me right now, and you kind of are (via video), but - if you were here in-person, I would ask for a show of hands in response to two questions. First, how many of you have ever had to forgive someone? It should be 100%. The second question is, how many of you have had to *ask* for forgiveness? I'm guessing that's also 100%.

When we think about forgiveness, and hear Jesus' command to do it, I think we often think we ought to be able to do it instantly. And sometimes we can, it depends on the situation and how deep the hurt is.

And I think we would *like* it to be easy all the time. That's what Peter was getting at in today's gospel reading, "Just seven times - right, Jesus? Then I can check it off and I'm either good with the other person or I'm not."

And Jesus said, "No...there's a little more to it than that." And the parable he tells to illustrate just *how much more* there is to forgiveness uses extreme examples. Which is the point. ¹The amount the servant owed the monarch was so large that it exceeded the national debt of a small country. *No one* could repay it.

¹ Section on the parable taken from https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4570

The second servant owed 100 denarii, which is still a fair amount of money, but it's measurable. Like the number seven in Peter's question. When the forgiven servant refused to extend compassion, it's no wonder the king got angry. He'd granted his servant a level of forgiveness that exceeds imagination, and yet that servant is unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another person.

In this parable, Jesus takes forgiveness out of a category that can be kept track of, and puts it into the realm of the incalculable. The forgiveness to which Jesus points is beyond any person's capacity to offer on their own strength or ability.

I think we're a lot like Peter - I think we want forgiveness to be easy and to think we can do it on our own. But it's *God's* compassion and abundant mercy that make human forgiveness possible in the first place.

It's *God's* compassion and mercy that give us the strength and courage to repent and grant forgiveness to one another; to, in effect, commit to the relationships we have with each other. And in that process, *God's* compassion and abundant mercy transform us, our relationships, and - ultimately - the world.

But even knowing that *God* is the one working through us to make all this happen, it doesn't make it any easier to forgive. We know this is true when it comes to our personal relationships with each other. But *God's* mercy and our ability to forgive aren't limited to just our personal relationships.

And I want to be cautious here. Because when we're on the outside of a situation looking in, or when we're the one who has caused the offense and is in need of forgiveness, it's tempting to look at the person who has been hurt and say, "you gotta forgive this, you gotta let it go."

But the only person who can determine the timeline of when forgiveness happens is the one who is giving it. No one else. And sometimes it takes a while, especially if the hurt is deep or has been inflicted repeatedly over time.

This is especially important to remember when we're talking about socially pertinent topics like domestic violence, racism, economic inequality, reallocating money from the police to community services, LGBTQ+ inclusion, the climate crisis, and so on.

In situations like these, it's easy to say, "Get over it and move on" or "You're kidding, right? That'll never work."

But if we think about forgiveness as a commitment to the relationships we have with each other - not just people we know, but also people who are involved in organizing around these issues - things start to shift. In that commitment, there's a willingness to learn and to change. There's a willingness to let *God's* mercy and compassion not only transform *us*, but also transform the world from what it is to what it ought to be.

And through *God's* mercy and compassion, we find the willingness to repent, and have dialogue, and pray with each other. We are given the strength to dig deep and let *God's* mercy transform the relationship moving forward.

And in that process, we recognize that forgiveness doesn't mean pretending that an offense doesn't matter or that the wound doesn't hurt. It isn't acting like things don't have to change and giving someone permission to continue hurting you. Forgiveness isn't a shortcut around your pain or saying that repentance isn't necessary from the person that hurt you.

We come to understand that forgiveness does not mean "happily ever after" and the relationship going back to the way it was before the offense. And that forgiveness isn't always quick or easy. That, sometimes, at best, it's a process that can leave us whole and liberated one minute, and feeling completely wrecked in the next.

Because forgiveness is choosing love instead of resentment. It's committing yourself to a relationship going forward. And sometimes that relationship is the one you have with yourself; so sometimes forgiveness means cutting ties with people so that you can move forward and be healthy.

Forgiveness doesn't always look the way we think it will, or happen when we hope it will, or lead to the places we think it should.

But through it, God's mercy and compassion are at work transforming us and the world we live in. We see it when people take the time to *listen* to each other when they disagree, instead of trying to talk *over* each other and compete to be heard.

We witness this transformation in peaceful demonstrations that call attention to ongoing institutional injustices, and remembering those injustices even when they aren't in the news. We experience it as friendships crack and sometimes break and come back together again.

We don't do any of this on our own. We can't; we don't have the strength or the ability. Human forgiveness is only possible because of the abundant mercy and compassion that God has for us. They are what give us the power and courage to commit to the relationships we have with each other and with our neighbor.

And as God's mercy and compassion work through those relationships to transform us into the people God calls us to be, they are also working to transform the world from the way it is to the way it ought to be. Thanks be to God! Amen.