

**Loving Our Uncomfortable Neighbor
Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
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Scripture: Matthew 18:23-35, John 15:9-12

I. Receiving the Gift

**Scripture: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
Matthew 18:23-35**

We are exploring a few of the Parables of Jesus to help us find tools for expanding our circle of relationships, discover unexpected skills for dealing with difficult people, and discovering God in mysterious ways in the process.

This week we are exploring the Parable of the unforgiving servant in the Gospel of Matthew. The reading we just heard describes the relationship between a King and one of his servants, as well as that same servant's relationships to his peers. But, it is also helpful to know that the story Jesus tells here is told as an explanation of Peter's question to Jesus in earlier verses in the Gospel. Verses 21 and 22 read, "21 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?' 22 Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"

What Jesus is teaching through this parable is the understanding of forgiveness: how it is given and how it is received. And the situation presented depicts a ridiculous and exaggerated event where a King dismisses an outrageous debt, legally owed to him, without a second thought. Just the action of the King is itself a far-fetched story, right? What kind of King would be so benevolent? Isn't it usually the king in most stories who taxes the peasants far more than what they can afford and is portrayed as the one who oppresses everyone else? So already my expectations for this story have been disrupted.

It's also helpful to know the extent of the debt the servant owed the King. The debt was 10,000 talents, and a single talent was about 130 lbs. of silver, which takes a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means that the servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labor! In other words, he would never, ever be able to repay this debt. Every person who heard Jesus tell this parable realizes the extent of this exaggeration, and hears it as reinforcing the answer he gives Peter when he uses the exaggerated figure of "seventy-seven" as the number of times you must forgive your neighbor.

For Jesus, forgiveness is both an extravagant and a precious thing, and God's forgiveness goes way beyond our ability to describe or comprehend. Yet, it is in this outrageous forgiveness that we exist in relationship to God, and therefore, it is the very ground and foundation for our relationships with one another.

Last week, Eric introduced this worship series by saying that Jesus, through his parables, described a particular way of life for being in relationship with one another and with God. Eric pointed to the 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus answers another question:

“³⁶Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Eric described this way of life as the “4 G’s: The Love of God, the Love of Neighbor, the Love of Self, plus the gift of Grace.” These 4 G’s speak to this relational nature of God’s love for us and how this love feeds and forms the love that shapes our relationships with ourselves and with one another. The grace that is God’s gift to us is this outrageous forgiveness that Jesus is speaking about in our current parable. It is a gift not earned or deserved, yet is foundational to our very existence and identity. This forgiveness, grace gifted to us in our very creation, is what continually disrupts our expectations and makes possible things that seem incomprehensible and ridiculous at first sight. Forgiveness means living out of freedom and thus opens us to the full measure of life, not just bits and pieces of it. Jesus is calling us to Recognize God’s gift to us and in turn to live as forgiving people.

So how are we living into these marvelous possibilities God has made available to us? How are we finding new possibilities in our relationships with each other? Does the joy from being released of a tremendous burden of expectation carry us out into our neighborhood to celebrate with others and dropping our own expectations of those we meet?

As we listen to our musical offering, I’d like us to spend time considering moments in our own lives when we have been impossibly forgiven, and how we responded to that grace. In receiving this outrageous gift, did it cause your way of life to change in any way?

II. Offering the Gift

Scripture: John 15:9-12

We have discussed what Jesus is telling us about how God works in relationship to us, but now we need to explore what Jesus says about how we receive this gift of forgiveness of God and offer it to our neighbors, even those uncomfortable neighbors. How are we doing with this part of parable? Do our lives reflect the never-ending love we have received from a gracious God, or do we act more like the servant, who after having been forgiven all, cannot turn and forgive their neighbor even a small amount?

Whereas the debt of the servant to the King was an outrageous sum, the amount owed the servant from their peers was 100 denarii. A denarius was worth about a day’s wage, which meant that the second servant owed the first about a hundred days of labor – no small debt, either really, but much more possible. This debt can actually be repaid. But still, how could the first servant not forgive the second their comparatively minor debt when they had just been forgiven an impossibly huge one? Yet this is exactly what Jesus tells us happened, and warns us against for our own lives.

Who, then, do we identify with in this story? If we can’t quite see ourselves as the king who forgives even the greatest of debts, then are we to identify with the unforgiving servant? Perhaps. But if we are this servant, wouldn’t that make *US* the uncomfortable neighbor who others have trouble loving? That would certainly be a reversal of our expectations, wouldn’t it? And, if we are honest with ourselves, there probably have been times when we have treated our

neighbors this way. Still, we aren't always this type of neighbor, are we? Maybe we are supposed to identify with the second servant who is being held responsible for a debt that is legally owed, but feel put upon that our neighbors would actually call in our debts. Is this really any better a position to be in than identifying with the unforgiving servant? Not really. It just seems a better place to be because we don't have to see ourselves as the "uncomfortable neighbor." We like being the nice neighbor, who can point to others and say, "Well, at least I'm not THAT bad!" I'm not sure there is a "good" person to identify with in this parable, besides God/King, and even on my best days I can't see myself here. This is why it's so hard for me to read this parable. I don't know my own part in it.

One colleague of mine wrote about his discomfort with this parable in a commentary. Rev. Dr. David Lose says,

"My difficulty with the passage has quite simply been that forgiveness can be so exceptionally difficult, and never more so than when it commanded. I don't mean the occasional moment of warm-hearted forgiveness, overlooking someone's minor slight when you feel magnanimous; nor do I mean the spontaneous forgiveness you feel when someone is genuinely contrite over some accidental – and again preferably minor – fault. What I mean are those things that are really hurtful; those times when the person seems disinclined to take responsibility, let alone apologize; those episodes that continue to wound each time you remember them; those words or deeds that have marked you deeply and painfully and feel like they'll never go away. Those are things that are so incredibly hard to forgive."

This is the feeling that keeps me from identifying as God in this parable. But I don't want to believe I am so hard-hearted as the unforgiving servant is either. So, who am I? I thought this sermon series was supposed to tell me how I can love those neighbors who make me uncomfortable? But there is the reversal of expectation, right? What happens when the uncomfortable neighbor is ME? Am I the neighbor that does not take responsibility when I have wronged someone? Am I the neighbor who never says I'm sorry? Am I the neighbor who does not see the pain they are causing in the world, or the impact my neglect has on a hurting world? What is Jesus saying to me, if this is true?

Dr. Lose continues,

"amid my despair at ever being able to forgive the way the king in the parable forgives, it occurred to me that I don't have to. That's not really what Jesus is asking. I don't have to identify with the king in this story, I can identify with the servant with the massive debt who has just been forgiven so, so much. Which means that my first job isn't to assume or insist that I must forgive incalculable debts, but simply to bask in the unbelievable forgiveness, acceptance, and grace that I have experienced and try, as much as I can, to live out of that. The failure of the first servant isn't simply that he won't forgive his comrade, but that he has just experienced an utterly unexpected, completely beyond-his-wildest-dreams, life-changing moment of grace and seems absolutely untouched by it. And for this reason, he lives devoid of any sense of gratitude. His whole life changed...and he didn't even notice."

How do we live better as a forgiven person? How do we notice the possibilities God makes way for in our lives by forgiving our debt? We forgive others – even when it is the most difficult, because this is how we are loved. God loves and forgives us, even to death on a cross: "Father,

forgive them, they know not what they do.” Forgiveness sets us free to live life most fully. Forgiving others keeps that freedom open and possible.

Jesus shows us that the unforgiving servant ends up in torture for their inability to forgive as they have been forgiven, and warns that our own freedom will be equally limited if we cannot find a way through to forgiving even those neighbors who have hurt us most. It is not God who limits our possibilities if we can't forgive others, it is ourselves who close our freedom off by shutting down our relationships with others. The way of life Jesus is showing us looks to God's extravagant gift to make possible ways that we too might offer this gift to others. In this way, our lives may be lived most fully.

I think about those people who have forgiven even others who have killed someone they love, The Families of the children killed at Sandy Hook, the families of those shot while gathering for Bible Study in Charlottesville, the victims of sexual assault, child abuse, and sex trafficking. Without finding a way through toward forgiveness, these people continue to be victims and narrow the possibilities of how their lives might continue most fully, even while carrying these scars and their grief. God opens possibilities. We enjoy these possibilities with others.

Relationship is not God's expectation, it's God's gift. Once we drop the limitations of what we expect from ourselves and others, realizing that all of life is gift, we can sit before God and our neighbors and just marvel, while allowing God and our neighbor to marvel at us. In this, we can freely give what is within us to offer the world: light, love, and wonder. Once we notice what we have received, honoring the outrageous gift of forgiveness, perhaps we will be much more comfortable with everything else around us, and we, ourselves, will be more comfortable to be around.

Amen.