

“The Secret to Being Forgiven”

Reading: Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

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When I was growing up in Indiana, there was an amusement park and beach that advertised using the tagline, “There’s more than corn in Indiana.” That claim is true, because there is indeed more than corn in Indiana: it’s true because farmers typically rotate their crops, so that one year they plant corn and the next year they’ll plant soybeans. So yes, there’s more than corn in Indiana, there are also soybeans. Still, corn is certainly a huge crop in Indiana, and so working in the corn fields is one of those jobs that is sort of a rite of passage for youngsters who are too old for a paper route.

The job I had one summer as a young teenager was with a seed company that was producing new hybrids of corn, and so the goal was to control how the plants were pollinated. That meant that every day, all day, crews would go up and down the rows, putting plastic bags over the little shoots that would become ears of corn to protect them from pollen, then covering the tassels on top with paper bags to collect the pollen, and then later on, pulling off the bags and putting the paper bag from the tassel down onto the ear of corn. It was a good job for a teenager, because it made me appreciate any other job that came after it. The fields were always wet and cold and muddy in the mornings, and then they were hot and humid the rest of the day. There’s not much shade in a corn field, so we were constantly sweating. And the leaves on a corn stalk are thin and sharp, so as you walked through them, you would get little cuts all over yourself, and then you would get covered in sweat and pollen and dirt, and all those little cuts would sting like crazy.

It’s the sort of job that I can describe to you, but you can’t really know what it’s like unless you live through it for yourself. No matter how much I explain it, I just can’t really convey what the experience was like. You’ve probably had some of those jobs, too. We all have those experiences, whether they’re times of wonder or love or misery, where you just can’t know what it was really like unless you were there. Even the best descriptions just can’t stimulate the senses as well as the real thing. You have to be there; you have to do it to know what it’s like.

Some things we learn best by doing, and we remember them best if we’ve had the experience. Today in our encounter with Jesus, we hear Him teaching us something that is really best learned by doing. As we learned last Sunday, this chapter in Matthew’s gospel is one of the times when Jesus gives us an extended sermon on a topic, and the focus in this chapter is on community and how to deal with other people in the kingdom of God. His teaching raises the question of forgiveness in the minds of some of His disciples: God has called His people together and He seeks the lost and He is present among them when they gather in His name, and He even entrusts them with enough authority in His kingdom that He considers it valid when they forgive sins or withhold forgiveness. So the natural question that opens our passage for today is what Peter asks: “How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?” How far does this inclusion in community go?

It’s one thing to talk about forgiveness, but it’s very much another thing to put it into practice. We can talk about it all day long, but until you’ve had to do it, you don’t know what it’s like. Peter suggests that we forgive someone up to seven times, and that sounds pretty generous to me. Forgiving someone once is hard work, if the offense is in any way serious, and it only gets harder to forgive them with each passing offense. By number seven, I’d probably be wondering whether this

person was really worth the effort of continuing the relationship. But that's not how things work in God's kingdom.

Jesus' response is extravagant, shocking, and maybe even impossibly optimistic. "I tell you, not seven times," He says, "but seventy-seven times." Or, in some translations, "seventy times seven." The point is that it's a huge number, far more generous than Peter's already very generous offer of seven times. As He so often does, Jesus drives the point home with a parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants," He begins. This king has one servant who owes Him an enormous amount of money, so absurdly large that it would be almost impossible for any normal person to pay it off in a lifetime. This servant appeals to the king's pity by promising to pay it back, but instead of insisting on repayment, the king simply writes off the entire debt.

It's a great illustration of how the kingdom of God works, isn't it? Extravagant forgiveness simply offered to those who will come. Your debts in life are so large that you cannot hope to pay them all off, and yet God is merciful enough to simply and completely forgive. He will "hurl all our iniquities into the heart of the sea." Pretty liberating stuff. But Jesus refuses to end the parable there, because you can't know forgiveness until you've lived it.

This servant has a friend who owes him some money, too. It's not a paltry sum of money, but it's not anywhere near the same league as the debt this servant just had written off by the king. But the servant refuses to put into practice the mercy that was shown to him: rather than forgiving his friend's debt, he demands immediate payment and has the man thrown into debtor's prison. When the king gets wind of this, he is, of course, furious, and revokes his decision to write off the enormous debt. The conclusion, Jesus says, is that "this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Some things we learn best by doing. Some things can only be experienced. And in this case, we learn that when it comes to forgiveness in God's kingdom, we cannot *have* forgiveness until we have *done* forgiveness. We cannot be *forgiven* people until we are *forgiving* people. This is not simply being optimistic about human nature, saying that "surely so-and-so didn't really mean it when they hurt me," or pretending that the hurt isn't as bad as it seems, or ignoring it as though it didn't happen. This is recognizing the magnitude of the debt and canceling it, calling it wrong and forgiving it anyway. This is "seventy times seven" forgiveness, without limits, because forgiveness with limits isn't forgiveness at all. Forgiveness in which we count to seven and stop is not forgiveness; it's still keeping score. This is forgiveness without limits, and it opens the door to the powerful work of the kingdom of God.

The issue here is that even before we begin tallying up all the wrong things we've done in our lives, we're already living with a huge debt. We live our lives in a state of rebellion against our rightful king, and so we are effectively traitors. Treason is a capital crime; in a sense it doesn't really matter what you do as a traitor, it's the very fact that you *are* a traitor that is a threat to the king and earns your sentence. It's an enormous crime with a potentially enormous consequence. But in God's kingdom, it is possible for that enormous consequence to be simply scratched from the record; forgiveness is possible. So, if the king is willing to do that for His subjects, it is therefore appalling for one of His subjects to refuse to be willing to do the same act of forgiveness on a much smaller scale

for a fellow subject. The Lord is willing to forgive His subject, therefore the subject ought to be willing to forgive his equal.

You cannot have forgiveness until you have done forgiveness. You cannot be forgiven until you have forgiven. You cannot place limits on forgiveness or it is not forgiveness at all. It's a hard word, especially when we talk about forgiveness *without limits*, because our pride and our anger and our legitimate hurt speak up and insist on being satisfied. And yet God is consistent on this stance. When Jesus' disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray, part of the prayer He gives them goes like this: "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." He goes on to say, "if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Again, He says, "if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." We cannot have forgiveness until we have done forgiveness.

Our readings for today included part of the end of the story of Joseph's life in the book of Genesis. Joseph was conspired against and betrayed by his own brothers, who first decided to murder him but changed their minds and decided to sell him into slavery instead. He eventually worked his way out of slavery and became second-in-command to the king of Egypt, while his brothers suffered through a terrible famine and were forced to come begging for food. Joseph revealed himself to them and forgave them, invited them to live in the king's household. Our passage comes at the end, when the father of all these brothers dies, and their fear is that Joseph has only been holding back for their father's sake, and now he will get his revenge. But no, his forgiveness is genuine: "Am I in the place of God?" he asks. Or we could skip ahead to later in the story of Jesus, as He hangs on the cross, bleeding and suffocating, and with His rapidly fading breath, He forgives the very people murdering Him. In this kingdom, forgiveness is limitless.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, as the message of Jesus spreads and the church grows, the expectation of forgiveness continues to need to be preached. The community of the church involves God seeking the lost, and it involves God forgiving the sinner to invite them into His kingdom. So as more people are found and reconciled with God, it implies that there will also have to be reconciliation among those people, too. The Apostle Paul had to repeatedly write letters and remind churches to be reconciled within themselves, to break down dividing walls of hostility between genders and people groups and classes. If we are reconciled with God, we will be reconciled with others, if at all possible.

It's not always possible, of course. Reconciliation means that both parties must be willing to engage in the process of forgiveness and repentance and change and rebuilding trust. That's not always what happens and it's not always appropriate in every circumstance. But forgiveness is always possible, if we make the commitment to it and hold fast to that commitment over time. Forgiveness is what you do within yourself; it doesn't necessarily involve the other person at all. It's the commitment to cancel the debt, to refuse to hold the wrong against them. Oftentimes it is not easy, and sometimes we have to forgive over and over again. You can't really know what it will be like until you do it. Like the complexity of my experiences in those corn fields, or your experiences that can't really be described, you have to go through the experience of forgiveness to know what all you will face in holding fast to that commitment.

But here's the amazing thing: when we forgive, we reveal the kingdom of God breaking into our world. We put in action the reign of the king who is willing to forgive such an enormous debt, and who also expects His servants to behave the same way toward one another. We show the world that we serve such a Lord, and that His Lordship has such power that it will lead us to do such counter-worldly actions. And when we go so far as to reach out in reconciliation to include the forgiven into this family, we invade the darkness with the light of God's kingdom.

There may be people you need to forgive today. It may be something small, or it may be something huge, an insurmountable debt that can only be forgiven with God's miraculous help. But if you have come to Christ, your debt has been forgiven, and you must do likewise toward your debtors. If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. Demonstrate the power of God.

Benediction: If the Lord kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with Him there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve Him. Therefore go and serve Him by forgiving.



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