

Forgive Us Our Debts

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 17, 2017

Matthew 18: 21-35

You know the moment in class when a student asks a question not because she wants to know but because she wants to show everyone else how much she knows?

That's what Peter was doing here. How often should I forgive, Jesus? As many as seven times?

Peter thought he had it right. Seven was a big offer. The number seven represented completeness, like the seven days of creation. Peter expected extra credit.

But Jesus said no, that's not enough. Jesus wanted complete completeness. Not seven times. Seventy-seven times.

In other words, forgiveness was not something to measure or count or exact. Their lives were to overflow with endless mercy.

And to explain what he meant, Jesus did what he almost always did. He told a story. On the surface, it doesn't sound like a story about forgiveness. It wasn't a story about wrongs we might struggle to forgive. It wasn't about hurt feelings or miscommunication or never helping with the dishes. It wasn't even about hard things like addiction or adultery or abuse.

It was a story about debt. A landowner set a slave free from an enormous debt. And rather than pass that freedom on to others the slave demanded from someone else every penny he thought was owed to him.

Jesus often talked about money. By some counts, nearly half of the parables deal with money. He told stories about landowners and workers, about a woman searching for a lost coin, about a father giving his younger son an early inheritance. One in ten verses in the gospels makes reference to money. Jesus talked about money more than love, more than heaven, more than hell. The only thing he talked about more than money was the Kingdom of God. `

This suggests that people then were like people now. Money was on their minds, too. They worried about it. They held their possession closely. They struggled to trust God for daily bread.

So to explain what forgiveness looks like, Jesus used the economic system of his time. This was something they all understood. Everyone who heard him knew how it worked. It was sort of like

multi-level marketing today. The landowner or ruler or king was on top. The servants or slaves were on the bottom. A lot of people were in the middle collecting rent and taxes. Many of the folks in the middle were also servants or slaves of the landowner. The folks in the middle were allowed to line their own pockets by charging extra to those below them. If you couldn't pay, you and your family were sold to other landowners or thrown into debtors' prison. Most slaves in this time were either prisoners of war or prisoners of debt.

So using the economic system of his time, Jesus invited the disciples to think about what it might be like to live differently. Peter asked about forgiveness, and Jesus talked about forgiving an enormous debt. He even exaggerated the story for effect. In Greek, the debt this poor slave owed reads as "a myriad of talents". A talent was equal to about 20 years wages for a laborer. A myriad was sometimes defined as 10,000, but only because 10,000 was the largest number anyone could imagine. This debt was so big it was not a real number. It was like saying the slave's debt was in the gazillions. This story was about something bigger than bank accounts. Jesus was talking about with mercy and generosity and compassion.

What do forgiveness and mercy look like? Like freedom from an enormous debt.

Jesus could tell this same story today. We are so used to debt in our world. It is everywhere. We take out loans to buy houses and cars. We carry debt on colorful cards in our wallets. You get cash back and free airline tickets if you take on more. When you get an acceptance letter to college, you also get a packet telling you how to borrow money to pay for it. And while some consumer debt is the result of bad decisions, most is not. The biggest burdens of debt are for medical expenses.

Like 21st century people, first century people were also very used to debt. They owed the landowner. They owed the person collecting the rents. They owed the person who sold them the seeds they planted. They owed the tax collector. They could not imagine ever being free.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, he wasn't just talking about a spiritual reality. This was practical stuff. He wanted them to set each other free from slavery to debt. In fact, that is how Peter asked this question. Lord, how often will my brother be indebted to me and I forgive him?

But we're still living with debt. And just as in the first century, 21st century debt is its own form of slavery. Debt limits freedom. It constrains our options. It affects our ability to save and give and plan for the future. And if you're not carrying debt today, you've received an amazing gift. You are like the slave who was graciously set free.

My own life is a case in point. Through no effort on our own, my husband and I avoided student loans. College was cheaper back then. We both got some scholarships. Our parents helped out. The seminary we attended was free. Taylor's mom paid for his second masters. A church I

served paid for my Doctor of Ministry. We didn't earn or deserve any of this. We were set free like the slave in this story.

I don't know your financial situations, but my guess is many here have been set free in similar ways. Maybe you've always had a job that provided health insurance, so you never had medical debt. Maybe you had help with education. Even if you received that gift through a benefit at work or through the GI Bill, it still set you free. Maybe you paid off your house or your car. Maybe you received an inheritance that paid off your credit card bills. However it happened, if you've been set free from a debt, you received the same gift the slave in this story received.

So having received this generous, gracious gift, what do we do? Do we continue to keep every penny we think we've earned for ourselves? Do we hold it all tightly? Do we take advantage of others to save more money for ourselves?

Or do we set others free? Do we give as has been given to us? Do we acknowledge the compassion that was showered on us and offer that same generous overflowing compassion to others?

The slave in this story received a gift of overwhelming mercy, but he did not live with mercy in return. His enormous debt was wiped off the books, but he still kept track of every penny owed to him. He grasped at it. He kept others in bondage. And as a result, he remained in bondage himself, confined to the torture that is selfishness and greed.

For Jesus, the economic and the spiritual were two sides of the same coin. Peter asked how to forgive. Jesus said learn to live generously. If Peter has asked how to live generously, Jesus might have said learn to forgive. One leads to the other. When we open our hands, we open our hearts. When we open our hearts, we open our hands. A generous person does not hold tightly to anything, not even a grudge.

We all have received the free gift of overwhelming mercy and forgiveness from God. Like the Israelites at the Red Sea, we have crossed over into a new land. None of us deserve this love and freedom. God simply has compassion for us and gives us new life.

So having received this endless gift, how do we respond to those who have wronged us? Do we continue to count every transgression? Do we keep track of all of their wrongs? Do we do to others what we think they did to us?

Or do we set them free?

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.