

Forgive Us Our Debts
25th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Sept 20, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Matthew 18:21-35](#)
[Romans 14:1-12](#)

It is 2020, and for millennials like me, one of the things that has helped make this year bearable at all is the profusion of memes into a wider culture. Now, some of you are like, “Yes, Pastor Lucus – Memes 4 ever!” and I know some of you are thinking to yourself, “What even is a meme?” and possibly, one of you is thinking, “Can it blend?” So, let’s start at the very beginning – a very good place to start – and I think you’ll soon see where I’m going with this.

The term “meme” dates back to the 1970s. It was meant to be used to talk about the way that ideas rely on and build up a common cultural understanding, the same way genes rely on and build up a common genetic expression – for example, a person. My genes code for a lot of things in common with every other person on the planet, but the subtle differences are enough to create unique individuals, despite relying on essentially the same genetic code. In a simplistic summary, genes code for traits, like brown hair or blonde hair, green eyes or brown eyes.

Memes, likewise, can be thought of as coding messages, rather than traits. Memes create and reinforce group-identity and morality. Like genes, they are a shorthand representation – and rely on good translation to be successful. And despite the term being new, memes themselves are as ancient as humanity. After all, folk and fairy tales are a form of meme. “She had a Cinderella moment...” you might have heard someone say. Or, “I thought he was a Prince, but he turned out to be a Bluebeard” – that’s a single-sentence horror story, relying on understanding the cultural myths. Going back further, national epics are memes: “That idea is truly Promethean – try not to let the boss hear you, or you might get chained up!”

“Whew, I feel like I’ve been on an Odyssey. I’m ready to get back to normal life!”

In the same way, religious ideas are often supported by memes. Jesus’ parables and stories illustrate and create new ways of thinking around the religious ideas. When asked, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus told a story about three people passing a deeply wounded man on the roadside. This uses the memes of “good person” and “bad person” – and stood the cultural memes on their head, creating a new meme: a neighbor is someone who acts as a neighbor ought.

So, when Peter asks Jesus, “How often should I forgive someone? Seven times?” he’s tapping into the memes of his day even in asking the question. We have written records of arguments between prominent religious leaders of the day, suggesting that most people believed forgiving someone once was good, twice was showing great patience, and thrice was pushing into foolish territory. Likewise, seven was considered a number of perfection or completion – seven days of creation, Joseph’s seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, seven high holidays marking each year and so on. So, Peter was drawing from two different memes to ask his question, probably expecting that his guess of seven-fold forgiveness was a grand gesture of respect and tolerance. So, when Jesus responds with, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times” – it was doubly shocking. He’s extending the meme of seven-ness well beyond where it’s easy to keep track of forgiveness.

And then, Jesus tells a story, relying on memetic characters – stock characters of the day – to reveal a great truth about forgiveness. You have the great king, the servant with the impossible debt, and the bullied low-ranking person. In the story, the King decides it’s a good time to settle accounts – a margin call, if you will. He somehow isn’t aware until it’s brought to his attention that one of his servants owed him an impossible debt – 10,000 talents of silver, worth 200,000 years of work for the average worker.¹ To put this another way, that’s between \$7-8

¹ A talent is worth 6,000 denarii (each one the typical daily wage of a laborer) – so 10,000 talents is worth 60,000,000 days labor – about 165,000 years without a break, or rounding to 200,000 for 6-day work weeks. Impossible barely scratches the surface of this debt.

billion today. This servant of the king, with this impossible debt, begs for time to pay it back. Surely, given a little time, he'll be able to raise a billion or two, right? Not hardly. But think of the effect when the king forgives this debt – it would have to have eased the burden of debt across all of the kingdom. Instead of worrying about how to pay back whatever portion of this debt was theirs, people could focus on the future, on saving up for emergencies and improving their homes and their situation. At one stroke, the king has improved the lives of everyone in the kingdom.

But the unforgiving servant, relieved of this enormous burden, turns down the ladder, and calls in the debts owed him, instead of passing on the forgiveness he received to others. The servant doesn't realize that forgiveness should be passed on! But when the king hears what the servant has done, he reinstates the debt, and forces the servant to work for the rest of his life paying it back.

This story plugs into the cultural understanding of the time – everyone knew, for instance, that Gentile kings were loaded, and might not be all that forgiving. But it also illustrates the point – that forgiveness should be spread, not just used for one's own benefit.

Later on, Paul uses the meme of servants and masters to make a point of forgiveness not just on debt, but forgiveness of differences among believers. In the last letter Paul ever wrote, this time to the church in Rome, he chastises the Roman church for squabbling about whether it was better to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, or abstain from meat altogether, just in case it was from a sacrifice. "How can you think for a moment that you have the right to judge another person's servant? Each servant answers to their own master, and they will either stand or fall in their presence. The good news is that they will stand because the master is able to make it so." Here, the cultural understanding is that servants couldn't judge each other because they were beholden to their own masters in their own way. Even though Christians serve the same Lord, they shouldn't judge each other for how they serve – after all, each is given their own tasks, and have their own way of service.

The Roman church was making it difficult for new converts, who were rejecting eating meat entirely to make a visible break with polytheism, because of a perception that acknowledging other gods made these people “weaker.” In so doing, they were no longer focusing on doing what could be done for others, but instead focusing only on internal matters. Paul is saying to them, to use a somewhat contemporary meme, “let it go.” Forgive the differences, recognizing that each are serving God in the way that they are called to do.

Tying these memes together – forgive seventy seven times and forgive differences – is the prayer that Jesus taught us. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We pray this prayer so often, it’s easy to overlook what this means. In Luke’s version of the prayer, for instance, translates a bit differently from the Greek than the version we’re most familiar with. There, Jesus teaches us to pray, “let go of the places we’ve missed the mark in the same way we let go of failures to pay that which is due.”² Or, in other words, “forgive us our sin in the same way we forgive our debtors.” It is a call to spread the forgiveness we’ve been given to others, to not hoard it for ourselves. We’re called to be better than both the servant with the impossible debt and the king in that story – forgiving not just once, but ongoing. And just like Paul reminded the Roman church, it’s not just about letting go of financial debt, but about social debt as well. We need to let go of trying to force each other to follow our vision – and instead, celebrate the worship of God from a diversity of viewpoints. Let us use the memes of faith to fulfil the vision of a fruitful world.

So, may you be forgiven, and filled with God’s grace. May you forgive and be filled with Christ’s love. May you see forgiveness changing the world, as the Holy Spirit works through all peoples. Amen.

² *Hamartia* – sin, or “missing the mark” / *Opheilema* – debts, “failure to pay that which is due”