

September 17, 2023 @ Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel
Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is hard. Even though we regularly pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” – we struggle with forgiving debts, both fiscal and emotional. Actually – you may be aware that there are two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible, in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus uses the same word twice - “*Opheilema*” – a Greek word meaning “a failure to pay that which is due” – a debt. Luke uses “*Opheilema*” and “*Hamartia*” in the same sentence. *Hamartia* is literally an arrow shot that misses the mark, figuratively the tragic flaw of human character – and is the word we usually translate as “sin.” Luke’s version, then, states, “Forgive us our *sin* in the same way we forgive our *debtors*.”

If you haven’t thought about what the Lord’s Prayer is actually saying in a while, that may be a big moment. In the prayer, we are asking God to forgive us in the same manner, or to the same extent, that we forgive others. That puts so much weight on our actions – I know I’ve thought about this passage before with worry – “What am I still holding on to that I should let go of? Will God forgive me if I haven’t forgiven everything?” When Peter asks Jesus, “How often will my sibling sin against me, and I will forgive him? Up to seven times?” it’s like he’s asking the same question – how often do I need to forgive someone else?

Jesus, of course, responds with the famous, “not just seven times, but seventy and seven times.” – whether he means 77 or 490 times, the purpose is the same – it’s not going to be an easily tracked number. You’re supposed to forgive, not to reach an arbitrary standard, but just simply forgive.

Then Jesus tells a story. A parable – a box of meaning to be unlocked again and again. In the story, a man owes a king over 10,000 talents of silver – an impossible debt to pay, as that would take over 50,000 years of work at minimum wage to even earn that stated amount. The king calls in his marker, the man begs for patience, and the king mercifully forgives the debt – releasing the man from the

threat of slavery for his entire family. Newly released of his impossible debt, the man shakes down someone who owes him 100 days wages – and receives the same response, have mercy, and I will pay it in time. Instead of forgiving this much less amount of debt, the man has his debtor thrown into prison. The king hears about this, and applies the same logic to the man, throwing him into prison permanently.

I don't know about you, but on the face of it, this story is terrifying to me. At first blush, I feel like the man was incredibly lucky to have that debt forgiven in the first place. But then I think – just how did such a debt come to be? Is it possible that the whole point of the king forgiving the debt was to say that there was never such a debt in the first place? That we begin with grace, a recognition that yes, we will mess up, we will miss the mark – but that God wants us to try again and again, and not give up.

Jewish New Testament scholar AJ Levine reminds us that Jesus uses the word “debt” deliberately: “It goes directly to the pocketbook;” she writes, “It says, don't hold a debt. If someone needs, you give. The call is for economic justice.”¹

Let's go back to the Lord's Prayer for a moment. What if God's grace isn't contingent on our forgiveness? What if, instead, we are asking God to help us forgive in the same way that we have been forgiven? “Forgive us our debts, as you help us forgive our debtors.” What if, instead of excoriating ourselves for the ways we have missed the mark, we recognize the grace-filled possibilities of forgiving others and trying again and again?

One of the earliest stories of God's grace is from the book of Exodus. We know the story of Moses: “Let my people go!” he shouts to Pharaoh again and again, and Pharaoh doesn't relent. Finally, Pharaoh agrees, once God's power to affect even him cannot be denied – but once the Hebrew people are underway, Pharaoh reneges on his promise, and sends his armies to force the people to return to slavery and oppression. The Egyptian armies catch up with the Hebrew people in a terribly restricted place – backed against a sea, with no visible crossing. During the night,

¹ *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*

God's very presence burns between the groups, keeping the Hebrew people safe as the winds blow in, separating the waters and creating a path of dry land. The Hebrew people walked safely across, when the pre-dawn light reveals them, and the Egyptians start to chase them.

God interferes directly, turning the wheels of the chariots and making their progress difficult. Some of the Egyptians recognize that God is present, and retreat, calling for others to do the same. But those who continued on, determined to enslave and oppress, to follow the evil orders of their superior – they end up caught in the floods as the waters rush back to their usual place. After that, the Pharaoh sends no more armies after the Hebrew people.

At first glance, this hardly seems a story of grace. God's actions seem more like vengeance or retribution than grace. Reading strictly, we might at first say, shouldn't the Hebrew people have forgiven the Egyptians for breaking their word, and meekly come back with the armies? But of course not. As Debie Thomas writes, "Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter... or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice."² Forgiveness in this story is seen in fleeing rather than fighting. In trusting God to lead the people beyond the need for violence, and to continue to protect them.

God also acts to protect the Egyptians who listen. Turning the wheels to prevent the chariots from continuing causes at least some of the Egyptians to turn around, to recognize that they are acting in the wrong. The only ones who perish are those who foolishly follow Pharaoh's orders, even when it is clear that those orders are evil and against God's will.

God sees graceful possibilities in a situation that seems to be impossible. Note that here, too, there is no immediate healing or reconciliation. The Egyptians that survived by running away do not make things right with the Hebrew people. Instead, they go their separate ways. Forgiveness here isn't the end of the journey – but the beginning. At many points during the wilderness wandering, the Hebrew

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2748-unpacking-forgiveness>

people want to turn around and return to Egypt – but they gradually recognize that God is leading them in a better direction. Forgiveness – Grace – is not quick and easy. It is a process that takes time, but gradually – oh so gradually! – brings an end to the weight of hatred and bitterness that prevents us from following God’s way.

When Jesus tells us to forgive seventy and seven times, he’s telling us to look for graceful possibilities. To bring forward love, instead of resentment. I love how Debie Thomas puts this, too: “If I’m consumed with my own pain, if I’ve made injury my identity, if I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with people who hurt me, then I’m drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers. To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of my bitterness... To cast my hunger for healing deep into Christ’s heart, because healing belongs to him, and he’s the only one powerful enough to secure it.”

We respond to God’s grace – amazing, awesome, awe-inspiring grace – by being free to offer grace to others. By seeing new, graceful possibilities for restorative justice – a way forward that God provides to heal both oppressed and oppressor.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor in Denver, describes mistreatment and sin as a chain that binds us unwillingly. But her words about breaking that chain are incredible: “Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn’t actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we’re not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a... way to say, ‘It’s okay,’ is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters and snapping the chains that link us? What if it’s saying, ‘What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’”³

So, my friends – what if you forgave the person that irritates you so much? Or

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/sermon-forgiveness>

the person that owes you a debt that cannot be repaid? Or even one that can? What if all of us, together, agree to forgive each other. What graceful possibilities would emerge then?

May you be forgiven and filled with God's grace. May you forgive, and be filled with Christ's love. May you see how forgiveness can change the world, and see the Holy Spirit at work, breaking the chains of evil, and bringing God's good plan to fruition. Amen.