

Mercy, truth and grace

Bible reference for sermon: Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister 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.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made.

As we read our bibles, we find some beautiful things that Jesus says that are really comforting. "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Lovely.

"Do not be afraid." Wonderful.

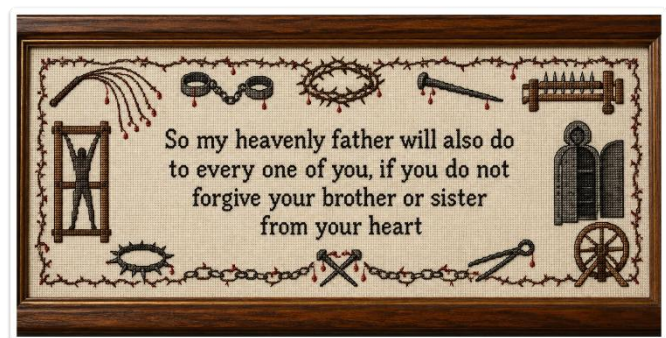
"I am with you always, to the end of the age." We can put that one on a mug.



And then there are the things Jesus says that make us want to quietly check whether there is another Gospel reading available this week. Today's Gospel might be one of those. Because Jesus finishes this story by saying that the servant who refuses to forgive is handed over to be tortured until the debt is repaid. And then, as if that weren't confronting enough,



Jesus says: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Not so nice on a framed embroidery on the wall, is it?



It's a difficult ending. Actually, it's a difficult passage. Peter comes to Jesus and asks a perfectly reasonable question: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Seven times - that sounds generous. If someone hurts you once, perhaps you can forgive them. Twice? Well, everyone has a bad day. Three times? We are beginning to notice a pattern. But seven? Seven feels like we are really trying. And Jesus says: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Or, depending on how the Greek is understood, seventy times seven. Either way, Jesus is not giving Peter a bigger

number for his forgiveness spreadsheet. He is telling him to throw away the spreadsheet. Stop counting. Stop keeping score. Stop asking, "How many more times do I have to forgive this person before I have fulfilled my Christian obligation?" Because that isn't how forgiveness works.

And if that were all Jesus said, perhaps we could manage it. We could leave church today feeling challenged but clear. Forgive everyone. Always. Seventy-seven times. Simple. Except that it isn't simple. Because this teaching about forgiveness comes immediately after Jesus' teaching about what happens when someone in the Christian community sins. This was our gospel reading last week. Just before Peter asks his question, Jesus says: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." If that doesn't work, take someone else. If that doesn't work, tell the church. And if the person refuses even to listen to the church, there comes a point when the relationship with the community is broken. And then Peter asks: "So... how many times do I have to forgive?" In other words: Jesus, you have just given us a process for confronting wrongdoing. Where does forgiveness fit into all of this?

Jesus is not talking about forgiveness as something that happens in isolation. He is talking about the life of a community. The church is not simply a collection of individuals who happen to believe the same things. It is a body. We belong to one another. And because we belong to one another, what we do to one another matters.

Sin matters.

Harm matters.

Truth matters.

Accountability matters.

And forgiveness matters.

All at the same time. That is a much harder message than simply saying, "Forgive people." Because there are things that happen in communities that should not simply be brushed aside in the name of forgiveness. There are wounds that need to be named. There are people who need to be protected. There are patterns of behaviour that need to be confronted. There are times when someone needs to hear, "What you have done is wrong, and it has caused real harm." And sometimes the most loving thing a community can do is refuse to pretend otherwise. Forgiveness is inseparable from truth-telling and accountability. The process Jesus describes in verses 15–20 is not designed to minimise sin. It is designed to name it, confront it, and, where necessary, give the community the responsibility of supporting the person who has been harmed.

Harm.

Sometimes we have preached forgiveness in ways that have done more harm. We have told people to forgive when what they really needed was safety. We have told people to reconcile when what they really needed was distance. We have told people to forget when what they needed was permission to remember. And we have sometimes confused forgiveness with saying that what happened wasn't really that bad. But forgiveness does not require us to pretend. Forgiveness does not require us to call evil good. Forgiveness does not mean putting ourselves back into situations where we are being harmed. Forgiveness does not mean that consequences disappear. And forgiveness certainly does not mean that someone who has abused power gets unlimited access to the people they have hurt.

That is not what Jesus is asking for. The context of Matthew 18 makes that clear. There is truth-telling. There is confrontation. There is accountability. And there is the possibility that the community itself may need to act. Only then do we hear Jesus say: "Forgive seventy-seven times." Which is perhaps Jesus' way of saying: Do all of that. And then don't become people who are defined by keeping score. Because there is another danger. We can become so concerned with justice that we forget mercy. We can become so good at identifying the sins of other people, that we forget our own. We can become experts at accountability when what we really want is punishment.

And so, Jesus tells a story. It is an outrageous story.

A king decides to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owes him ten thousand talents. The number is deliberately ridiculous. It is an impossible debt. There is no conceivable way this servant could repay it. The man falls on his knees and says, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Which is, frankly, rather like promising the bank that you will pay off your mortgage by Tuesday when you haven't got any money. The king knows the debt cannot be repaid. And then comes the astonishing part. He forgives the debt. All of it. Gone. The books are wiped clean. The servant walks out free. And then, almost immediately, he finds another servant who owes him a much smaller amount. And he grabs him. "Pay what you owe." The man makes almost exactly the same plea: "Have patience with me." But there is no patience. No mercy. No memory of what has just happened.



The servant who has been forgiven an unimaginable debt refuses to forgive a debt that, by comparison, is tiny. And the other servants see it. They are distressed. And they go to the king. The community sees what is happening.

They don't shrug and say, "Well, I suppose he has his reasons."

They don't say, "Don't judge."

They don't say, "Maybe we should just forgive him and move on."

They recognise that something is wrong. They speak. They act.

They bring the matter to the one with authority to address it.

This is a community that does not confuse forgiveness with silence.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts of this difficult passage is that we learn that we are not meant to carry everything alone. Sometimes we are the person who has done the hurting. Sometimes we are the person who has been hurt. And sometimes we are the people standing around watching something happen and wondering whether we have the courage to say, "This isn't right." The church has a role in that - a role in recognising sin, a role in accountability, a role in forgiveness. Those things belong together.

And yet we come back to that awful ending. The king becomes angry. The servant is handed over to the torturers. And Jesus concludes: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." It's a difficult ending - perhaps one of the most difficult endings in Jesus' parables. And I don't think we should

pretend otherwise. If we read this as a simple picture of God—God is the king, God forgives you, but if you don't forgive perfectly enough, God will torture you—we end up with a picture of God that sits very uneasily beside the God revealed in Jesus.

The parable is deliberately excessive. The debt is excessive. The violence is excessive. The punishment is excessive. Jesus is using the language of exaggeration to shake Peter out of his desire to calculate forgiveness. And yet it is not the torture that strikes me most – it is the absurd grace that is revealed. The king cancels a debt that could never be repaid.

And then the forgiven servant walks straight back into the old economy of debt, power, violence and keeping score. He has

been given a new world, but he chooses to live as though nothing has changed.

And perhaps that is where the parable turns toward us. Because we are very good at keeping score. We keep score in families.

Who apologised first?

Who called whom?

Who always has to make the effort?



We keep score in friendships. I've forgiven them twice, but they haven't even said sorry. We keep score in churches. I've done my bit, why aren't they helping? We keep score politically. Socially. Economically. And sometimes even spiritually.

I have been good. They have not. I deserve this. They deserve that. And Jesus comes along and says: Throw away the ledger because the kingdom of God is not built on keeping score – it is built on mercy.

Not cheap mercy.

Not mercy that ignores suffering

but mercy that refuses to allow our lives to be permanently governed by resentment and retribution.

Forgiveness is not saying, "It didn't matter." It is saying, "It mattered. It hurt. It was wrong. And yet I do not want what happened to have the final word over my life." Forgiveness may mean reconciliation or a restored relationship that comes from sitting down together and telling the truth. This can lead to repentance and changed behaviour. Sometimes these things don't occur and restoration is not possible. God's heart breaks when there is a lack of repentance or acknowledgement of harm caused.

It may mean forgiveness from a distance and sometimes it may take years. And sometimes we may not even know whether we are ready to forgive. And maybe that's okay. Because Jesus doesn't say to Peter, follow this three-step program and everything will feel better. He simply points him toward a life in which mercy is no longer rationed out according to what people deserve.

Grace. Mercy.

Maybe that is something we can practice - not perfectly, not quickly, not without tears. But gradually with God's help. We might begin by telling the truth about what happened.



We might ask for help when we cannot carry it alone. We might allow the community to stand beside those who have been harmed, and, as community, we might have the courage to confront wrongdoing rather than quietly protecting the comfortable. We might repent when we realise that we have been the unforgiving servant. And perhaps, eventually, we might be able to loosen our grip on something we have been carrying for a very long time.

Because the Christian life is not about becoming people who never hurt one another. We will. I will. You will. We are human. The church will disappoint us. People we love will fail us. We will fail people we love. There will be conflict, apologies that come too late, apologies that are never offered. There will be wounds that remain tender. But the church is called to become a different kind of community - a community where sin can be named, where victims are believed and supported, where those who cause harm are called to account, where repentance is possible and where restoration is hoped for. And where forgiveness is not measured out in teaspoons.

Because underneath all of this is the strange and beautiful truth of the Gospel: Before we are people who forgive, we are people who have been forgiven. Before we offer mercy, we have received mercy. Before we open our hands and let go of the debt's others owe us, God has opened God's hands toward us. At the cross, Jesus does not meet us with a ledger - he meets us with mercy. And perhaps that is why we can begin again, even though we know that forgiveness is not easy and not every relationship can be repaired. Because the grace of God is bigger than our capacity to calculate it.

Peter asks: "How many times?" Jesus says: Stop counting. And maybe that is the invitation for the church. To stop counting who owes what. To stop keeping score. To stop pretending that forgiveness means silence. To stop imagining that justice and mercy are enemies. And instead to become, together, as a people who tell the truth about sin, who protect the vulnerable, who call one another to account, who make room for repentance, and who keep opening the door to mercy. Seventy-seven times. Not because seven wasn't enough. But because grace was never meant to be counted.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>