

Debt Relief

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Several of you inferred from the sermon title that I'd be speaking today about the Jubilee movement: the global, interfaith initiative to advocate debt cancellation for the world's poorest nations. The concept of "Jubilee" comes from the biblical mandate in Leviticus to retire land indebtedness every fifty years, as a way of keeping families and communities from losing their primary source of livelihood. Christian and Jewish faith communities have organized to encourage a similar kind of debt relief for nations in extreme poverty—countries such as Lesotho, for example, with a population of 2 million people and external debt of 647 million dollars. Lesotho's annual debt servicing equals its entire education budget which may explain something of why more than one-third of the nation's children are not able to attend school. Fairmount has been studying these matters for some time as a "Jubilee" congregation, concerned that the burden of debt upon impoverished countries seriously threatens their ability to develop and thrive and provide for their citizens. It's an economic issue, but also a spiritual one as we remember Christ's command to care for "least of these who are members of my family."

I wanted to reference global debt relief today because of its scale—so large it's hard even to imagine. That's the kind of scale Jesus used in a story he once told about debt forgiveness. The story contrasts a king who is owed by one of his slaves a sum of money equal to the gross domestic product of a small nation, and that same slave to whom a colleague owes an amount that might make a down payment on a house. If we don't see the absurdly huge disparity between those debts, we might miss the meaning of Jesus' answer to the question that prompted the parable. *How often should I forgive?* Listen for

God's Word to us in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the eighteenth chapter at the twenty-first verse:

[MATTHEW 18:21-35]

From Jewish tradition comes the story of two brothers who could not settle a property dispute. Angry and divided, they took the matter to their rabbi, and asked him to hear their grievances. The first brother tells his story; the rabbi listens carefully. When he finally falls silent, the rabbi pauses for only a moment and then responds, "You're right." Dismayed but undeterred, the second brother launches into his side of the story. The rabbi listens carefully. Silence for only a moment, and then, "You're right." The brothers are taken aback, the first no longer jubilant; the second no longer downcast, but both are puzzled. And then, from the kitchen, the rabbi's wife is heard. Sharply: "He's right, and then he's right? How can they both be right?" Unperturbed, the rabbi answers, "And you're right." [*Times Literary Supplement*, 9/11/98]

This beguiling little tale sheds some light on our text this morning, and on the whole difficult topic of forgiveness. The rabbi's wife unwittingly asks the question that may resolve the dispute, because the answer to her question "how can they both be right?" requires acknowledgement that they both can't be right....completely, and thus must also be wrong....at least in part. The story doesn't tell us whether the brothers embraced this wisdom and worked out their dispute. And frankly, if forgiveness were mostly a matter of reason, it would be a whole lot easier. But it isn't, is it? There are some divisions so long-standing, some wounds so deep, some betrayals so final, some judgments so entrenched, that forgiveness seems utterly impossible. The solemn commemorations of the seventh anniversary of 9/11 raise the question on a broad scale, but this text forces us instead to consider the intensely personal. Peter did not ask about forgiving the Romans who had conquered and oppressed them, nor even about how often to forgive the competitors who sought his downfall. Instead, Peter asks how often he should forgive a brother, a friend, a fellow church member who has done him wrong. Jesus' response is God's word to us

about the unresolved resentments, grudges, and remembered hurts harbored against family members, colleagues, the people with whom we share faith.

Forgiveness is one of Christianity's distinctive features, and certainly one of its most important ideals. Every Sunday we offer the Lord's Prayer, praying (more or less in unison) "and forgive us our debts, or sins, as we forgive our debtors, or those who sin against us." The words are different, but they point to the same reality: we "ought" to forgive the wrong done to us as a prerequisite for divine forgiveness. But it isn't easy. In fact, reality may be closer to the observation of twentieth-century Christian giant C.S. Lewis who wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."

So I imagine that the apostle thought he was being magnanimous when he suggested that "seven" seemed like an appropriate number of times to forgive wrong-doing. Certainly that's better than a mere "second chance" or "three strikes and you're out." Seven is a lot for a repeat offender after all. But Jesus takes that number and increases it exponentially—not seven, but seventy-seven, or as some translations put it, seventy times seven. In other words: numberless times; always.

Jesus illustrates "why" with this parable of contrasts: the slave of a king is released from an enormous debt the repayment of which would have virtually destroyed him. Yet he turns around and refuses to forgive another slave who owes him a far smaller amount. The first slave clearly had not learned anything from the mercy shown him by the king; he would have to be forgiven again, maybe seventy-five more times.

And yet, the king doesn't do this. In fact, if Jesus intended the king's action to reflect the divine standard, he blew the point. The king doesn't forgive the unmerciful slave even twice, let alone seventy-seven times. He smacks him down but good. So what's going on here? Maybe Jesus is being descriptive rather

than prescriptive. Maybe he's saying that refusing to forgive sentences you to something like spiritual torture. An existence without mercy, without grace, where we get only what we deserve. In reality, it is a world without God, a world where the scales must always be balanced, and life's joy and freedom experienced only to the extent they're deserved. God doesn't have to punish the unforgiving; it's a self-imposed exile that disfigures the soul and erodes a sense of well-being and peace.

But if Jesus told the parable to say "why" we ought to forgive without limit, he also tells us "how." The difference between the debt forgiven by the king and the debt left unforgiven by the servant reveals the impossibility of balanced scales. The servant can never, ever repay the king: one talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer; he owes the king one hundred fifty thousand years worth of work. On the other hand, his fellow servant owed him about three months' wages. In that contrast we come face to face with God's generosity: far, far more than anything we deserve, anything than we are owed; far, far more than all we ask or dare to imagine. God's loving knows no limits; God's generosity is measureless; God's mercy is from "everlasting to everlasting."

Forgiveness, it turns out, is not a spiritual achievement, not a work that we can earn, but a gift. In God's incalculable economy, it is ours to receive. A gift offered to those in debt, which is to say, to all of us. To receive it is to acknowledge that we are all in the same boat. Every one of us a debtor without hope of repayment. All standing in need of mercy and forgiveness. Can I look at the one who has hurt me and see myself in her angry eyes? In his dismissive attitude? Can I relax my death grip on grudges, resentments, and calculated indifference, realizing that my grip is really around my own heart? Writer Anne Lamott puts it graphically: "the inability to forgive feels like drinking rat poison, and then waiting around for the rat to die" [*Lamott, Traveling Mercies*].

Jesus told Peter and you and me to stick with it, not to stop because it's too hard, or it doesn't come naturally, or because

they don't really deserve it. Keep practicing; again and again and seventy times again. And I think Jesus said this because forgiveness affects the one who forgives as deeply—and maybe even more deeply—as the one who is forgiven. We can't control the actions of the ones who hurt us. They may never modify their behavior or ever seek to be reconciled. But forgiveness sets a prisoner free~ and in forgiving, we discover that the prisoner is our very self.

This may be hardest of all. To sense on some level that we could never get out of debt, that we were in a deficit position with respect to our truest and best selves and that God has canceled the entire amount of what we owe. We can look honestly at ourselves and say, "I am forgiven." We are free from the crushing, life-denying burden of sin, and can make a new start *by extending to someone else in need the same grace we've been given.*

Acknowledging our need takes some humility and self-examination. When I think about the people in my life who I may need to forgive, I find it relatively easy to assign fault, to catalog the slights they've shown me, to replay in my mind their unfair accusations, and to lament their stubborn resistance to changing their attitude. But all that really does is calcify my heart; make it hard and unbending; convinced of my rightness, but blocking the life-sustaining flow of love. A friend shared with me another way, a better way. The way of forgiveness.

A few days before his death, I was sitting with my dad at the hospital. I'd come out to the folks a year earlier, and they'd not had the time and resources to work things through. Mother died five months before Pop and we'd never really made our peace. But that day at the hospital Pop suddenly said, "I don't understand it all, but I know when you are home, that we're a different family." And that was enough. It was one of the most healing moments of my life. [from a personal e-mail]

Forgiveness brings healing, in ways we can barely imagine. Forgiveness takes down barriers that keep us from one another. It doesn't excuse bad behavior, but it frees us from the destructive effects of that behavior. And it creates new possibilities for wholeness, on a personal as well as community level. One of the best insights I've found on the art of forgiveness is from Lewis Smedes, a Reformed theologian and pastor who wrote several books including one with this telling title: *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. He makes the point that forgiving does not erase the bitter past. "A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future."

Friends, I really don't know any other way to bring about that transformation than to remember what God has done for us, and for all people. God has not set up the world as a spiritual test we'll either pass or fail. God intends nothing less than to redeem the whole creation; to mend what is broken; to reconcile all that is shattered. God invites us to join that transforming work. We learn to forgive the same way we learn to love....because God first loved us; because God first has forgiven us. . . .and will again, until earth and heaven are one. What a relief!

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM OUR SINS AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN.

Friends, now we depart into a week that will hold for each of us both challenge and joy, and much that is unknown. Go in peace, remembering the words of our Lord Jesus: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.