

Covenant Word

Keeping Score

Exodus 14:13-14, 19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

foundation on which the Kingdom of Heaven is built. Jesus makes it clear that if we are to live in community with one another, then forgiveness must be actively practiced.

Jesus has been speaking at great lengths about what relationships in the Christian community are supposed to look like. Nothing is to get in the way of doing everything we can to nourish and strengthen the bonds of love...not our quarrels or rivalries or hurt feelings or even our blatant sins. If one goes astray, we are to leave the rest of the flock in order to find the one straying and restore him/her into full fellowship, Jesus says. Last week, Jesus gave step-by-step instructions on how to straighten out differences in the community of faith. And this week, Jesus tells a story that none of us want to hear, but need to hear if we are going to be a community that lives the core values of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The gospel begins with Peter listening to Jesus. He gets concerned about what is expected of him. He wants a guideline, a limit, a specific number of times that he is expected to forgive

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We had gotten comfortable with one another, as Bible study groups can do after meeting for several times. While I don't remember the context in which it was offered, one of those about the table made an off-hand comment about some wine in which she had indulged. There were snickers all around the table except for one. Frances, known for her ability to "go off," did just that. She started with her strong opinions about drinking, making sure we knew she was keeping score of who took a nip every now and then and who did not. This changed pretty quickly to lecturing us about drinking. As I watched the group's cohesiveness dissolve, I quietly asked Frances to share why she had such strong feelings, then maybe we could hear her words better. She burst into tears and told the group, "It was on Mother's Day! Mother's Day of all days...my preschool son was in my brother-in-law's car, and they were hit by a drunk driver. It took the life of my child, but the drunk driver lived." After utter quiet and stillness, we placed Frances in the center of our circle and surrounded her. We gently laid our hands on her and voiced prayers for her healing and that with healing would come forgiveness for those who survived. When we finished, she left the room and never returned to Bible study again.

Forgiveness it seems is the foundation on which the Kingdom of Heaven is built.

another. It is almost like he has a ledger with debits and credits listed next to the names of every person he knows. He wants to keep score, checking off each time he practices forgiveness. So he asks, "How many times must I forgive?" Now Peter thinks he is being generous when he suggests seven times, because the conventional rule of the day was only three. Three seems to be about right for my capacity to forgive. Like Peter, I stand ready to forgive graciously, but I am slow to give up my bad and cautious attitude! But Jesus says, "Oh no! You must forgive 70 times 7!" Which is about the same as saying that there is no limit to forgiveness; that forgiving those who sin against us is a work with which we are never done; that forgiveness is something that goes on and on forever. Forgiveness is not enacted seven times and denied on the eighth transgression. No, forgiveness is a way of life that never ends. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Once More From the Heart," Seeds of Heaven) And then Jesus tells a hard parable.

Some of us endure great tragedies in our lives. Things for which forgiveness is rarely found: the loss of someone dear, physical abuse, the emotional absence of a parent, the harassment of a co-worker, the betrayal of a friend, the unfaithfulness of a spouse, the dishonesty of a trusted confidant and a whole host of others. In each instance, I believe we can uncover the common thread of the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness it seems is the

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

Now remember our rule about parables. The first sentence tells us the main focus. It is not God that Jesus says is compared to the king. No, it the Kingdom of Heaven that is compared to the king. Why don't we want God to be this king who is initially a paragon of mercy and forgiveness? We don't because by the end of the parable, the king loses all his positive attributes by throwing the unforgiving servant into debtor's prison. This is not an image of God that I want residing in my spiritual photo album, and I doubt you want it either.

The context of the entire chapter is the community that makes up the Kingdom of Heaven. So if we stay focused on the community, a spotlight gets placed on the servants who go to the king on behalf of the mistreated servant. It is a display of exquisite Christian concern. The community believes that the poorer servant should be treated with as much mercy as the king showed the first servant. This community knows that the King is merciful by looking at the amazing forgiveness of debt he offers initially. The community is upset by the way the servant snubs his nose in the face of the king's generosity by then enacting retribution on the small debt of the poorer servant. Please realize that we are talking about the difference of millions! The king's forgiveness is as absurdly abundant as the amount of the debt that is being forgiven. So when this wicked servant refuses to forgive the paltry sum owed him by another, the community is outraged. I find it amazing that the other servants by-pass the scoundrel. They go straight to the king. They go where they know they can get action that restores community. They go where expressions of mercy have already been given. They go where relationship is the priority. (Gracia Grindal, "New Math," The Christian Century, 9-10-02)

It comes down to: wouldn't you rather gamble with what is known than to risk the unknown?

And isn't this the tragedy of this story?

Believing that he had pulled the wool over the eyes of the sentimental old monarch, it never crosses his mind that what is REALLY happening to him is that he is being forgiven from the heart by someone who understands the enormity of his debt – indeed, by someone who has financed it – but is willing to let it all go, willing to stop keeping score, willing to erase the debt that has become a substitute for the relationship so that they can get to know one another again. Because isn't that what forgiveness is?

We forgive one another because we want the relationship to be restored, and relationship is impossible to experience if our hands are full of score cards and calculators. (Taylor)

I think of that self-imprisonment and it reminds me of the hundreds of ways we allow ourselves to be enslaved by the lack of forgiveness that we deny giving ourselves and others.

So it is relationship that the servant completely misses. He misses relationship with the king; he misses relationship with his peer; and he misses relationship with the community as a whole. The story ends with his being thrown into jail, but the truth is that he is already in a self-inflicted imprisonment...his own little Alcatraz of solitary confinement with only his calculator to keep him company as he keeps track of his accounts. (Taylor) This isolation is the danger of refusing to give and receive forgiveness.

I think of that self-imprisonment and it reminds me of the hundreds of ways we allow ourselves to be enslaved by the lack of forgiveness that we deny giving ourselves and others. It feels like wilderness. It feels like all the possibilities for escape are shut off. It feels like being caught between what we know is right and still choosing to do otherwise. It feels like the dread and helplessness and fear that comes when facing the oncoming night. It feels like standing in between Pharaoh's army and the waters of the Red Sea – caught and captured, anticipating slaughter in our vulnerability. It feels like taking the first to step into deep water.

You see, in this story, when the Israelites escape Egypt and come to the shores of the Red Sea, they realize that they are trapped. The Red Sea is before them, and Pharaoh's army is swiftly gaining on them with chariots and spears and swords. The Egyptian officers are dressed for war. And the Israelites are just standing there on the banks of a sea whose waters are churning and deep. They begin to fret saying that they are better back in the land of Egypt. Apparently, to them, it is better to be under the yoke of slavery than to stand at the edge of waters of unfamiliar newness and fresh beginnings.

Standing on the edge of hopeful forgiveness and newness of life is a dangerous place to stand, because fear enters and creates a horrific illusion that being enslaved to our grudges and hatred and hurt feelings is a better place to be. Isn't it easier to just avoid a confrontation than to work for real forgiveness, even with the promise of genuine reconciliation? Isn't it better to return to your abuser than to step into unknown territory, even with the promise of safety? Isn't it easier to keep drinking than to move forward without the bottle, even with the promise of health? Doesn't it feel better to nurse those grudges and wounds than to act respectfully to the source of your enslavement, even with the promise of freedom? It comes down to: wouldn't you rather gamble with what is known than to risk the unknown? The Israelites' imaginations reach their limits, and so they begin to listen to their fear: "Yes, let's return to what we know even if it is brick-

making, pain and violence. We will at least have a place to sleep; we will at least have some food; our children at least will have some time to play." A return to Pharaoh seems oh, so much better than dying in an unfamiliar land sandwiched between Pharaoh's armies and a sea of chaos.

And so the twelve tribes of Israel, as only they are wont to do, begin to murmur about what should happen next: give in to Pharaoh or step into the sea. And if they step into the Sea, who is willing to take that first step?

That feels like an awful lot until we stop to consider how many times we have been forgiven from the heart over and over and over again, through no merit of our own but simply because Jesus loves us so very much and wants to love us even more.

Through the centuries of telling this story, the rabbis developed a Midrash or a story that because of its insight could be scripture but isn't. And so in this Midrash, it seems that a man named Nahshon ben Aminadab became fed up with the arguing. He turns to the sea and starts walking into its depths for the sake of the larger community. He walks in up to his ankles. Nothing happens. He walks in until the water is up to his waist. Nothing happens. The waters reach his chest. Still, nothing happens, but he keeps walking. The water reaches his neck and nothing happens. But when the water of the Red Sea hits Nahshon's nostrils, the sea opens up, and the floor of the ocean becomes dry ground, just as God had promised. And so Nahshon, one voice of courage and hope, one soul in search for forgiveness, leads all the others to their freedom and the beginning of a new life that God held for them.

Now we say this is Midrash, interpretation, but if we were to look at the genealogy of Jesus as recorded in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, you will find in verse 4: "Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab, the father of Nahshon." Wonder of wonders, Nahshon ben Aminadab is a part of Jesus' family tree. It seems to say something about the God who makes a way that no one else can imagine, a God who can make a way of salvation and forgiveness that leads to reconciliation and healing. (Kershner)

Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes in *Unfolding Light*:

To forgive you will pass through the sea.
You will leave much behind:
what is owed, obligations,
the heavy chains of your master anger.

Just leave them.

You will be tempted to turn back and fight
but that is the slavery you are escaping,
the lie of superior and inferior,
the cruel economy of deserving.
It is a lie. Walk away from it.

You will be afraid of being overtaken
and hurt again
but God's mystery will protect you.

Go, on foot, through the wounded
sea,
your tears a wall on your left and on
your right.

Take only your love with you.
You will find yourself on the far shore
unburdened, free,
in the wilderness of love,
never needing to go back.

You will do this
seven times seventy times.

Seven times seventy. That feels like an awful lot until we stop to consider how many times we have been forgiven from the heart over and over and over again, through no merit of our own but simply because Jesus loves us so very much and wants to love us even more. Once we let that sink in, once we have wrapped our heads around it and opened our hearts to receive it, how can we pass up a single chance to go and do the same?