

Concrete Forgiveness

(Text: Matthew 18:21-35)

Once upon a time there was a man who loved dogs. He served as a speaker in various civic clubs to benefit the SPCA. He was known far and wide as a dog lover. One day his neighbor observed him as he poured a new sidewalk from his house out to the street. About the time he smoothed out the last square foot of cement a large dog strayed across his sidewalk leaving footprints in his wake. The man muttered something under his breath and smoothed out the footprints. He went inside to get some twine to string up around the sidewalk only to discover dog tracks in two directions on his new sidewalk. He smoothed those out and put up the twine. About five minutes later he looked out and the footprints indicated that the dog had cleared the fence, landed on his sidewalk and proceeded as he desired. The man was mad now. He toweled the wet concrete smooth again. As he got back to the porch he saw the dog come over and sit right in the middle of his sidewalk. He went inside got his gun and came out and shot the dog dead. The neighbor rushed over, "Why did you do that?" he inquired, "I thought you loved dogs." The man responded as he cradled his gun in the crook of his arm. "I do, I do like dogs, in the abstract, not in the concrete.

I wonder if it might not be the same with forgiveness. We love it in the abstract, but when we really have something to forgive, we dislike it in the concrete. However Jesus says to us in the parable for this morning that the only kind of forgiveness that means anything is concrete forgiveness. So let's begin our thinking about the parable by concentrating on the debts forgiven.

We read in verse 24 that the slave owed the King ten thousand talents. After being ordered to pay up, and being in no position to do so, the king orders that this slave be sold along with his family. At verse 26 Jesus says that the poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and said "Give me a chance and I will pay it all back." Jesus then says that the king was touched by his plea that he erased the entire debt.

Now, go down to verse 28, where this same slave comes across a fellow slave, owing him a hundred denarii. The one who had just been forgiven ten thousand talents grabs this guy by the throat demanding payment now. Notice that the

fellow slave's plea is the same as the one used by the slave when before the king. Compare verses 26 and 29. The only difference is that the slave owing a hundred denarii doesn't exaggerate his promise by saying "everything", as does the slave to the king. Rather he is sincere and says "I will repay you," implying it will take some time but please be patient with me and you will get back what is yours. But the slave who is owed a hundred denarii doesn't want to have anything to do with forgiveness in the concrete but wants it to remain in the abstract and so to speak gets his gun and figuratively shoots the fellow dead

Now in order to grasp the contrast between the two debts I want to compare the amounts. How large amount was 10,000 talents? One talent was equivalent about 6,000 denarii.

A denarius was a day's normal wage. Thus the slave owed the king something like sixty million denarii. Using the rate of \$50 as one day's wage, the amount would be three billion dollars. The mercy of the king goes beyond the actual request. The request was for patience to pay the debt in full, something that the slave could never do. Yet the king was willing to forgive the debt entirely!

How much was a hundred denarii? Remember, a "denarii" was equivalent to a day's wage. Using the same rate above (\$50/day), the amount would be \$5000. The unmerciful servant refuses to heed the same plea made earlier by himself, even though with time, this lesser debt could be paid off.

The reason why Jesus tells this parable is because at verse 21 Peter had asked Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times.

Whereas Peter's question centered on the quantity of forgiveness, Jesus' answer and the one with which the parable ends centers on the quality of forgiveness. It has to be real. Concrete and not abstract. From the heart. Forgiveness has to be more than just words. Jesus answers Peter by telling him not to assume that you can count how many times you offer forgiveness and then be done with it. Forgiveness must become a practice -- a commitment -- that is to be sustained and renewed each day throughout our lives. It is not a single action, feeling or thought. Forgiveness must become an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with God and with others. Peter asks how generous

he should be, yet he is still asking about limits. He's thinking quantitatively while Jesus answers qualitatively -- with the offer of limitless forgiveness. This is what God is like.

Because we have been abundantly forgiven by God, we are able to forgive others in turn. The servant who owes the ten thousand talents hasn't come to terms with what the King's forgiveness means. Although he could never repay the debt, he thinks he can and so when he is forgiven it makes no impact on his own life.

Jesus teaches that there is a direct connection between forgiving others and being forgiven. Therefore, in the Lord's Prayer we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The parable of the unforgiving servant focuses on those who are willing to receive God's forgiveness but are unwilling to offer it to others. The servant has been forgiven a huge debt and yet is unwilling to forgive a significant but much smaller debt owed to him. Such unwillingness shows, though, that he really is not able to receive God's forgiveness. For truly to receive forgiveness is to recognize how extravagant God's gracious forgiving love is and, in response, to offer it to others.

What does it mean, "to forgive"? Literally, the word means "to send away" or "to make apart". The bible talks about sin as "missing the mark" -- not hitting the perfect bulls-eye. Forgiveness is "removing" or "taking away" all the errant arrows that have missed perfection. Nothing imperfect remains. They have been "sent away".

In terms of reconciliation, we might say that forgiveness "sends away" whatever has been keeping people apart. Given the context of this passage we are talking about the kind of forgiveness that has been preceded by repentance as verses 15-20 make clear. The one who has acknowledged their fault, their sin is able to admit that in some way I have gone astray and missed the mark in our relationship. However it is the one who needs to forgive the debtor who so to speak sends away or takes out the errant arrow. We can see this in relation to ourselves and other people.

Forgiving means to be released from whatever keeps one "bound". Anger or feelings of vengeance are "sent away." By forgiving, one is no longer under the

control of that past sinful act he/she suffered. We can define forgiveness as "Not letting past sinful behaviors (whether my own or what was done to me) determine how I will think, act and feel in the present." It is being released from those past events, thoughts and feelings.

Forgiveness also implies that there is something to forgive. The conversation, "What's wrong." "Oh, nothing!" doesn't lend itself to forgiveness. Forgiveness implies that someone has sinned. The second slave really owed the first slave something significant, \$5000.00 Someone has failed another in some way. It might be disobedience. It might be hurting one's feelings. It might be little failures, e.g., forgetting a special day, not following through on a commitment or it may be something much bigger. The betrayal of a confidence, adultery, lying, a thoughtless act on the part of someone that caused an accident. Whether it's something big or tiny, the need for forgiveness means somebody has done something wrong.

As you think of your life today is there a person whom you have forgiven in a quantitative way but in your heart the arrow is still there? Is there someone to whom you said I forgive you but when you think of them your thoughts and feelings are I would like to get out the score sheet and remind you of what you have done so as to make you feel really bad? Can you admit honestly that I say the Lord's Prayer with the line Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us but you know I am really like the dog lover who loves forgiveness in the abstract but not in the concrete?

If we are to really listen to the parable Jesus challenges each of us to develop a forgiving Spirit.

st focusing on God's forgiveness of you. This is where the unmerciful servant went wrong. He didn't take to heart how much he had been forgiven. Perhaps you haven't either. Perhaps you think you cannot be forgiven and so you have a deep sense of self-loathing and hatred. When you come to receive Communion today allow the sacrament to touch those places in you own life where you don't think you can be forgiven. As we come to realize the freedom offered to us by Christ then with Paul we can better understand what he means when he in Ephesians 4.32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

n allow the Lord to help you love and forget. Some may protest and say It is impossible to forget But let's first define forget Technically, we may be able to recall the offense to our minds but for all practical purposes, we so disregard the offense that it is out of mind and doesn't control our heart.

Is this possible? By the grace of God, yes It takes time and involves struggle Though it can be difficult not to be overcome by bitterness and feelings of score keeping when we have been hurt by someone close to us each day, for the rest of our lives, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won. Christian communities are sustained by people who know what it means to discover the miracle of God's forgiveness, and who are thus committed to a way of life as forgiven and forgiving people

For if we say, 'Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget,' as though the God, who twice a day washes all the sands on all shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then we know nothing of the merciful love of God. And like the man at the used at the beginning of today's sermon we live life in the abstract.

But there is not such thing as abstract forgiveness. It has to be concrete.

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