

ALWAYS FORGIVE. NEVER FORGET.

Jesus the storyteller: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

You know how people always tell you
you should never use the words, “always” and “never”?
You’ll have to excuse the title of my sermon today,
which uses *both*: “Always forgive. Never forget.”

You could accuse me of making an overstatement in that title
just to get a point across.
And you could be right.
But I won’t concede on that . . . *yet*.
Let me make my point, in the next 15 or 20 minutes.
Then you decide whether or not I’ve overstated.

Furthermore, if I *am* guilty of overstatement, I’m in good company.
In today’s story, Jesus was blatantly overstating things.
And he got the listeners’ attention.

You heard the story.
A Gentile King forgave a huge debt
that was owed him by one of his highly regarded servants.
Whereupon this servant went out and found a fellow servant
who owed him a much smaller amount of money,
and attacked him, demanding that he pay up now,
and when he *couldn’t*,
had him thrown into debtors’ prison.
Which caused the King to reverse his earlier forgiveness,
and he threw the *first* servant into debtors’ prison.
That’s the gist of it.

The one glaring overstatement in this story comes at the beginning.
The servant owed the king ten thousand talents.
That’s an amount of money so huge,
I think Jesus came up with that number just to get a laugh.
There wasn’t a person in the whole kingdom
who could have paid off that sum of money.

One talent was about 15 years wages for the average person.
To come up with \$10,000 talents,
you’d have to work for 150,000 years.

It’s even *more* unthinkable
when you understand the social system at work *behind* this story.

The Bible Background commentary suggests that the king
Jesus had in mind in this story was likely
one of the Greek rulers of Egypt, before Rome conquered Egypt.
“Servants” here meant the king’s upper-level slaves—
who were better off than nearly *all* of Egypt’s free people,
most of whom were peasants.
These servants were persons of authority
who functioned as the ruler’s tax collectors in various regions.
The ruler would allow them to collect taxes for him at a profit,
but he demanded efficiency;
this was the time of year when he settled their accounts.

It’s unthinkable that the king would have even allowed
the servant to get that far in debt to *begin* with.
Ten thousand talents probably represented more than
the entire annual income of the king,
and perhaps more than all the coinage in circulation at the time.

Taxes were exorbitant in those days, especially for rural peasants,
but the early historian Josephus
reported the annual taxation from all of Galilee and Perea
under Herod was only two hundred talents.
Ten thousand talents is an over-the-top number.
A truly incalculable debt.

Okay, so Jesus’ *other* over-statement?
It was his comment to Peter just before *telling* this story.
Just before this story, Jesus told his disciples how to deal with
people in the church who had wronged them.
First go to them privately.
If there wasn’t a resolution, go with a couple others.
If not even then, take it to the church.

Well, the ever-inquisitive Peter wondered,
in this new Kingdom Jesus was preaching,
how often is it proper to forgive one who commits the same sin?
Some rabbis taught that three times was proper.

If someone committed the same sin *more* than three times,
there clearly wasn't true repentance,
and repentance is required for forgiveness,
so three's enough.

Peter threw out a truly generous number.

Forgive seven times?

more than twice what other rabbis taught?

Jesus gave Peter the kingdom number—

again, probably to get a laugh . . . or a gasp.

Seventy times seven (or seventy-seven times,
depending on which text you're referencing).

When I was growing up in church, we only had King James,
which said seventy times seven . . .

490 repetitions of the same sin—a number even *I*,
as a stereotypical teenage preacher's kid,
would likely never reach.

So the message was—forgive . . . *always*.

I had to rethink this a bit when modern translations arrived,
and made it seventy-seven times.

That number I might be able to reach,
and forgiveness might run out on me.

But what I failed to account for was Jewish idiom,
and the deep meaning given to certain numbers.

Seven was a number that symbolized completeness . . .

it makes no difference *how* you translate it—

seventy-seven or seventy-*times*-seven—

either one means completely complete.

No exception.

Jesus was using the word, "Always."

Always forgive.

That probably *wasn't* the answer Peter was looking for.

In Matthew 18,
as part of a larger discourse to his disciples
about life in the kingdom of God,
Jesus teaches extreme forgiveness.

"*Always* forgive."

Probably not the answer *any* of us are looking for.

But what about the "never forget" part of my sermon title?

All of know that the noble thing to do is "forgive and forget."

Right?

No. That's *not* right.

In fact, I would suggest that to "forgive and forget"
actually undermines the power of forgiveness.

To begin with,

for most wrongs that are done to us,
forgetting isn't even a human possibility.

We will *always* remember.

The issue is *not* about forgetting.

It's about how we frame the memory.

We are called to forgive,

because we remember.

And our continuing memory

calls for continuing forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an ongoing spiritual discipline.

Forgiveness is a regular spiritual workout,

it exercises a spiritual muscle we need to keep in shape.

So then, what *is* forgiveness, exactly?

How do we know if we have forgiven someone?

Donald Kraybill, a Mennonite sociologist,

has written a lot recently on forgiveness.

Largely in documenting the response of the Amish community
after the tragic 2006 shooting deaths

in the Amish schoolhouse in Nickle Mines, PA.

We all heard and read in the news

about how as a community,
the Amish of Nickle Mines said they forgave the shooter,
and there were amazing stories of healing visits
made by the Amish to the shooter's family.

Let me quote some lines from Don Kraybill's writing.

“One way of defining forgiveness is to say what it is not.
It is not forgetting, but rather it is remembering in a new way . . .
The Amish will *never* forget, nor *should* they,
that awful day in October 2006.
But they will remember it and frame it in a new way
because of their forgiving response.
Forgiveness also does not mean condoning evil or excusing it.
Forgiveness is so difficult because evil is taken so seriously.”

Let me repeat that line.

“Forgiveness is so difficult because evil is taken so seriously.”

“Forgiveness is different from pardon, which erases punishment . . .
The Amish were quick to say that if
Charles Carl Roberts IV had lived,
they would have wanted him incarcerated,
not out of revenge, but to protect other innocent children.
Perpetrators can be forgiven by a victim
but *still* held accountable for their actions.
In other words,
forgiveness and justice are two different things
and should *not* be confused.”

That is where we go wrong so often in talking about forgiveness.

When someone says, I could *never* forgive that person.
What they *usually* mean is,
I could *never* let that person not pay the consequences.
I could *never* act as if nothing ever happened.
I could *never* forget.

Well, the thing is,
it's quite possible, even *healthy*,

to remember,
and to hold persons accountable,
and . . . to forgive.

At the convention in Pittsburgh the other week
we who attended the adult worship
heard a powerful, and disturbing, story of forgiveness.
It was told by a woman who is now pastoring
a Spanish-speaking Mennonite church in Florida.
She told of a childhood filled with pain and neglect and abuse,
both physical and sexual abuse.
She told how in her teen and young adult years,
she dreamed repeatedly of the day she could confront
her primary abuser, one of many men in her mother's life.
She visualized the moment he would kneel at her feet
begging her to spare his life as she pointed a gun to his head.

That moment actually came.

When she went back years later to see her mother,
and the man was still with her,
and he confessed to what he had done,
and got down on his knees.
Except, she said, she had no gun in her hands.
She only had the Spirit of Jesus in her.
So she chose to forgive.

I don't know how that man's story ended.

But offering forgiveness did not exempt him from accountability.
She could have forgiven him and *still* testified at his trial,
if he ever had one.
Offering forgiveness did *not* deny the horrible evil he perpetrated.
Offering forgiveness did *not* mean she would ever forget the evil.
Offering forgiveness was just doing what kingdom people do.

To forgive is to do what the king did in Jesus' parable.

It is to let go of the power and will to personally harm another,
to get what *I* want or need,
which more often than *not*, is revenge.
Forgiveness is to embrace a different kind of power.

Remember, this is a parable about the kingdom of God.
As virtually *all* parables are.
Jesus started his story with the words,
“the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who . . .”

So this is a story about the kingdom.
If we read this *only* as a personal morality tale,
we miss half the story.
This is about the heart and soul of kingdom living.

God the king, through the person of Jesus Christ,
does not establish his authority
by brute strength and enforced obedience.
As demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
God’s power is made known
in vulnerability,
in risk-taking,
in giving *away* power,
in forgiveness.

Like the servant in the story, we owe more to God and God’s kingdom
than we could *ever* pay in a lifetime.
Yet God forgives us.
And invites us to remain in his service.
That is, we are *not*, actually, off the hook.
God keeps us in the kind of relationship
where we continue to be held to account.
And then *we*, the forgiven-yet-still-accountable,
go out and behave the same way toward others,
showing the same grace and vulnerability and power-shifting,
that was shown to *us*.

Forgiveness is *more* than a personal moral choice
we ought to make as individuals.
Although it *is* that.
Forgiveness is *more* than good psychology,
because it frees us from being consumed by anger and resentment.
Although it *is* that.

Forgiveness is the lifeblood of the kingdom of God.
Without it, the kingdom doesn’t exist.
The kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness,
which opens the door to the possibility
of reconciliation, of restoration, of healing.
Forgiveness doesn’t *equal* reconciliation.
It only opens the door to the possibility.
Reconciliation is a whole different journey.

We honor the sovereign ruler of this kingdom
by receiving the forgiveness offered to us,
and passing it on to others.
We honor God by imitating God’s love and mercy.
By being patient and forbearing.
By letting go of coercive power.

Yes . . . we are called to always forgive, and never forget.
We are called, as kingdom citizens,
to *always* let go of our desire to use our power and will
to inflict harm on others.
And to let God, as well as the law of natural consequences,
exercise final judgement.
And to continue to remember, but reframe our memory,
in light of our forgiveness.

Have I overstated things?
I’m going to say no.
You’ll have to decide.

May God have mercy on us all.

—Phil Kniss, July 17, 2011