

Forgiving: Embracing Freedom
Matthew 18:21-35
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Then Peter came to Jesus and said to him, ‘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 times seven.”

Then Jesus said, “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents [around \$60 billion] was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

“But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii [or \$5,000]; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

OK, true confessions: this one hits *way* too close to home. Who picked this theme for Lent, anyway? Oh, wait ... *mea culpa*. I am, indeed, at fault. On so very many levels. Not the least of which is clinging to grievances and slights, injustices and hurts.

But *not* forgiving ... well, that's not an option, Jesus tells us. Forgiveness is an imperative, at the core of what it means to call ourselves Christian:

- When we want to strike out at our offender, Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt. 5:39), and “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43).
- When we presume to judge others' sins, Jesus says, “Before you try to take the speck out of someone else's eye, take the log out of your own” (Matt. 7:5), and “Let any among you without sin cast the first stone” (John 8:7).
- When we turn to God in prayer, Jesus teaches us to say, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12); and when Jesus himself is being crucified, he prays for those who kill him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

So ... we know what we're supposed to do. The question is, how do we get there?

There is no single answer. There is no magic formula. And there is no time-table. For each of us it will be different. Some of us may never get there, because of our anguish, or fear, or brokenness, or bitterness, or rage. And let me say loud and clear, no one *ever* has the right to push us into forgiveness. That is just cruel.

And yet ... and yet, in the end, when we *don't* forgive – when we cling to our resentment – eventually, it will own us. It becomes our identity: we are forever the victim. And that is not what God wants for us.

I'd love to hear from you how you've learned to forgive others. For now, let me share two tools that I've been handed by Jesus.

The first tool Jesus handed me to help me learn to forgive is to see how much I've already been forgiven. When we grasp our own indebtedness, we

are more likely to set down the debts of others. That's the point of his story, isn't it? The king summons a slave to pay his catastrophically huge debt. There is no way this man will be able to pull together \$60 billion. So the king decides to collect what he can by selling the man, his family, and their possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs, *the king forgives the entire debt*. And then ... then the slave turns around and demands his fellow slave pay back an absurdly tiny amount – and jails his debtor when he can't pay. To say that this angers the king is a gross understatement.

Which is, Jesus tells us, how God feels when we take for granted the forgiveness we have received. When we take God's amazing grace for granted ... when we reduce God's mercy to "cheap grace" ... when we presume our own entitlement to Christ's costly love ... when we refuse to own our complicity in the need for the cross ... when we fail to see the thousands of ways we have hurt people, failed God, sinned boldly or cluelessly. Our ability to forgive others grows when we see how indebted we are to God.

This helped me through these last painful months as I sank in the flood of my feelings – feelings from shame to indignation to fear to bitterness. It "happened" that I had to write an article for *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine ... and the assignment "happened" to be a prayer of confession. Writing it helped me lift my eyes to see the magnitude of God's love for me, and the debt of gratitude I owe. Here's part of my prayer:

We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep;

I am a sheep. A stupid, senseless, wandering sheep. That's what I am.

Why don't I look for your direction, Lord? Why do I keep running off

to whatever bright shiny toy ... or delectable fruit ... or self-righteous pride ... or desire to belong beckons me, as if there are no wolves, lurking?

We have offended against thy holy laws,

Picking and choosing as I wish, pretending "love your neighbor as yourself"

or “bless those who persecute you” doesn’t count:

when the soccer mom in a hurry cuts me off in traffic and I flip her off

never mind the times I’ve been the one in a hurry ...

or the broken-hearted struggling friend screams at me and I’m done with him

never mind the times I’ve been the one who screams ...

or the neighbor who is too black, too homeless, too gay, too old, too Muslim -

you know who you are –

is someone I stick up for on Facebook posts but never see in real life

because I am too busy, too preoccupied, too obtuse to notice.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done,

Like call my friend who is depressed before it’s too late

or take seriously my neighbor of a different political persuasion

or notice my privilege

or visit my father on his birthday while he’s still with us

or tackle climate change before the North Pole grew 36° warmer than normal or

Haiti was swamped by hurricanes and then forgotten.

We have done those things which we ought not to have done.

Do I really have to list these, Lord? Here’s a start, from A to Z ...

Anger. Bitterness. Cloying neediness. Disdain. Ennui. Fear. Gossip.

Hubris. Impatience. Jealousy. Know-it-all-stupidity. Laziness.

Mendacity. Nastiness. Opportunism. Petulance. Quivering. Racism.

Self-righteousness. Temper. Ugliness. Vengeance. White lies.

Xenophobia. Yielding to the easy way. Zombie self-absorption.

You get the point. I commend the A-to-Z exercise for you to do sometime. It is not easy, “owning” our sins. But when we do, when we recognize the vastness of God’s compassion for us, the debt that has been wiped clean from our account, settled by God’s absurd, illogical, immense, staggering grace ... when we see that our own \$60 billion debt has been cleared by the blood of Jesus ... we first must kneel in awe at the throne of grace, and then go out and share even a shred of that same grace with others. That’s the first tool Jesus has given me.

The second tool Jesus gave me is a model of what is possible, starting with his own example. He forgave others - even the very people who chose to crucify him. Sometimes it’s hard to imagine forgiving someone who has gravely wronged us, or worse yet, hurt those we love. But then we see someone who has chosen to model the way of Christ, and it changes the landscape utterly.

That happened to me when I heard Jeanne Bishop’s story. Some of you may have heard it too; what I’m about to share is compiled from various news sources. It goes like this:

On April 7, 1990, newlyweds Nancy and Richard Langert’s went out for dinner with Nancy’s family to celebrate the very happy announcement of her pregnancy. While they were out, 16-year-old David Biro broke into their Winnetka home using a glass cutter, and waited for them to return. When they got back, Biro shot Richard in the head and Nancy three times.

Jeanne Bishop, Nancy’s sister, was at choir practice at Fourth Presbyterian Church. It was Palm Sunday: “The secretary came and said, ‘You have a phone call.’ “I said, ‘Can you take a message?’ “She said, ‘No, you need to come with me.’” Jeanne immediately thought of her elderly father. But it was his voice she heard over the phone: “Nancy and Richard have been killed.”

I remember that day well. I was on staff at Fourth Church then; I was in the sanctuary when Jeanne got the news.

It took six months for the police to arrest David Biro. An honors student at New Trier, Biro had once been admitted to a psychiatric hospital for trying

to poison his family. He bragged to his friends about the Langert murders. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Jeanne was satisfied.

Fast forward twenty years, to 2012, when Jeanne read *Forgiveness: Christian Reflection*. It contained these words by Randall O'Brien: "No Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one or wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation." Jeanne says,

"I was incensed. I called O'Brien. I told him my story. I said, 'I'm supposed to reconcile with him? What would this look like?' This is what he said: he said it would look like Jesus on the cross" as he prayed for his own murderers.

"I felt my heart, hard and rigid, cracking open. I had always made a divide between Nancy's killer and me. Him: bad murderer. Me: innocent victims' family member. The truth was, there was no division between us before God—we were both flawed and fallen.

"[Then O'Brien challenged me, 'Wouldn't it be amazing if God used you to bring this man into relationship, if he joined you in heaven one day?']"

Soon Jeanne began to pray for David Biro, saying his name aloud for the first time in 20 years. In January 2013, she wrote to him, asking if she could visit him. A week later, David Biro—who had never admitted to the murders, far less shown remorse—wrote back. In his 15 page letter, he confessed to the crime for the first time, and agreed to meet.

The day before Jeanne drove to Pontiac Correctional Center, she had coffee with the 83-year-old man who had driven it every other week since 1991: Nicholas Biro, David's father. She says, "We met at a coffee shop and sat on a little couch and talked for two hours. He was so gracious. One of the things I found so moving: He had written out these directions for me to drive out to Pontiac. He said I needed to keep my things in a locker, and he had two quarters for me to use the locker. I left thinking, 'Why didn't I do this years ago?'"

When Jeanne first sat across from David Biro in prison, she did not find the person she'd expected. "I'd turned him into a monster. I'd mythologized him as a thing called a murderer. He's a 40-year-old man."

Since then, Jeanne has visited David many times. Before each visit, she prays that she will be able to share that "he's loved and valuable and that God has a purpose for him. What I wanted for him before was to rot in prison and suffer, and that would make him sorry. But what made him sorry is to experience the unconditional love of God and the forgiveness of his victims' family member."

Jeanne doesn't sugarcoat what happened. She calls it "horrific, heinous, and merciless." She wrote a book about her experience, *Change of Heart*, and goes into detail. "I want people to understand that I'm not forgiving him because it wasn't so bad." Instead, this is her message: "It's not okay what you did, but I am not going to hate you. I am not going to wish evil on you. I am going to wish the opposite. I am going to wish that you will be redeemed."ⁱ

That's Jeanne's story. I don't know if I could do it. There are plenty of far, far lesser slights I cling to, as though my grievances could give me life. But this I know: Jeanne's forgiveness has set David Biro's spirit free. And just as importantly, her forgiveness *has set her spirit free*.

And this is my prayer for all of us: someday, may we all come to know what Jeanne does. When we forgive, it is *we* who receive the power of God's amazing grace, the power of God's love to set us free.

Amen.

ⁱ Morgan Lee, *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2015, "Forgiving Her Sister's Murderer, Face to Face," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/may/reconciler-jeanne-bishop.html?start=1> and Steve Schering, March 21, 2015, "Jeanne Bishop Recalls Her Sister's Murder, 25 Years Later," <http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/winnetka/news/>