

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
Matthew 18:21-35
August 4, 2019

Rev. William J. Ingersoll
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Do you recall one of the most famous photos to come out of the Vietnam War – a small girl running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror, her clothes burned off, and her body scorched by napalm? The man who coordinated the raid on this child’s village in June 1971 was a 24-year old U.S. Army helicopter pilot and operations officer named John Plummer. The day after the raid was conducted by South Vietnamese airplanes, Plummer saw the photo in the military newspaper “Stars and Stripes” and was devastated. “It just knocked me to my knees and that was when I knew I could never talk about this.” The guilt over the raid had become a lonely torment. He suffered periodic nightmares that included the scene from the photo, accompanied by the sounds of children screaming.

The girl in the photo, Pham Thi Kim Phuc, survived 17 operations, eventually relocated to Toronto, Canada, and became an occasional goodwill ambassador for UNESCO. In 1996 Plummer heard that Kim would be speaking at a Veterans’ Day observance in Washington, not far from his home.

At that observance, Kim said, “If I could talk face-to-face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we could not change history, but we should try to do good things for the present.” Plummer, in the audience, wrote her a note, “I am that man,” and asked an officer to take it to her. At the end of the speech, he pushed through the crowd to reach her and soon they were face-

to-face. “She just opened her arms to me,” Plummer recounted. “I fell into her arms sobbing.” All I could say is, “I’m so sorry, I’m just so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Kim responded. “I forgive. I forgive.” (Story from Robert Karen)

“How profound is the need to be forgiven and to forgive. You know it deep inside. You feel it. You need the freedom of being forgiven and forgiving.” Says the minister Robert Zanicky:

“Forgiveness – a word, a concept, a reality of life that is filled with nuances and always in need of a human context.

Forgiveness – needed for any society to exist and flourish

– needed for relationships to continue and mature

– needed for one’s personal enhancement and health.”

Clearly, forgiveness is central to our faith. In fact, on Sundays, following the Assurance of Pardon, when we hear the good news of the gospel, “in Jesus Christ we are forgiven”, while we’re singing the Gloria, I wish bells would ring and the ceiling open to allow confetti to fall from the sky! For this word is at the heart of the gospel!

That’s why Jesus has so much to say about forgiveness. In our New Testament lesson, Peter steps up to Jesus and asks him a sincere question. In fact, he asks him a very crucial question. It was the question of forgiveness. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter would have known that the

contemporary orthodox thought on the matter was that a person should forgive another three times. Peter wanted to know, “Really, how many times should I be willing to forgive someone who has sinned against me? Give me a formula, an equation that will allow me to fulfill my obligation to that other person and keep me in good standing with God. Is it three, perhaps even seven?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times but seventy-seven times.” The number here is difficult to translate so some of the older translations say, “seventy times seven”. The exact number is unimportant; the point is, it’s a lot, a whole lot.

“Does Jesus really mean that we give the so-called friend who told your secret another chance, not to mention seventy-seven” or seventy times seven chances? “Does Jesus really mean that we give [an] abusive spouse one more try . . . seventy-seven times? Does Jesus really mean we give our business partner, the one who’s been siphoning off some of your profit, seventy-seven more shots at the day’s income?”

“The answer to each of those questions,” says one minister (Greg Bostrom), “is . . . not necessarily. Because forgiveness may not be what we think it is. You can forgive the untrustworthy friend without ever telling her another secret. You can forgive the abusive spouse while filing for divorce. You can forgive your cheating [business] partner while dividing the business and going your separate ways. Because forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you must restore the person to her previous position in your life. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean you must rebuild the relationship with him to its former state. [Instead] forgiveness is something [by God’s grace] you do within yourself. Now we may wish to restore a friendship, we may

want to rebuild a marriage, we may try to renew a partnership, but all of those reunions depend on the response of the other person. Let me say it again: forgiveness is something [by God's grace] you do within yourself." We'll come back to that shortly.

Jesus followed his answer to Peter's question with a wild story of a man who owed his king 10,000 talents. A talent was equal to 15 years of typical daily wages, an incredible amount. Who could be so foolish to borrow or to lend such a sum?! The man pleaded for the king to have patience, and he would repay him everything. Right. Even more ridiculous, the king had pity and he forgave the man his total debt.

The story continues but turns dark. This forgiven man was taking a walk, and he came up to another servant. This servant owed him 100 denarii, about 100 day's wages. And what did the newly forgiven man do about this? He grabbed the debtor by the throat, and said to him, "Pay me what you owe!"

This owing servant pleaded with the forgiven one. "Have patience with me and I will repay you." Almost identical words to what the forgiven man had said to the king. But the forgiven man refused to be moved and had the other servant thrown into debtor's prison.

Hard to believe, right?

Here was a person forgiven something akin to the national debt and he was not willing to forgive a debt owed to him of three month's work. Understand, we're not talking about banking here. The issue is forgiveness. Jesus could have referred to something other than money to make his point, but he knew money would get their and our attention.

The issue here is – you have been forgiven by Almighty God. Can it be that you are not willing to forgive a fellow human being? The debt you owe to God was uncountable, and yet you’ve received forgiveness. Now, when you’re on the line, is it possible that you won’t forgive someone who has wronged you? (Robert Zanicky)

Jesus is quite clear on this: we are commanded to forgive. It’s not optional. So let’s be clear about what forgiveness is and what it is not. One commentator suggests that first of all, “forgiveness takes human pain seriously. Forgiveness is not what we offer when someone has let the TV remote slip between the cushions in the couch where it resides for three [long] days; forgiveness is for the serious ways which we hurt each other. Second, forgiveness is a process. Chances are that forgiveness rendered quickly ‘Sure, I forgive you,’ is either offered in response to something insignificant (like losing the remote control or forgetting to pick up the milk on the way home) or a surfaced response that hasn’t yet experienced a deeper pain. Forgiveness comes into play when we have been betrayed by a friend, abused by a loved one, taken advantage of by a colleague, and forgiveness of these deep wounds takes time. Forgiveness is a process, a journey, in which we are trying to do something very difficult.” The late theologian Lewis Smedes calls forgiveness “the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and a memory we cannot forget.”

Think about that again. Forgiveness is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and a memory we cannot forget. When Jesus calls for us to forgive, then, he is not simply telling us to forgive for the benefit of the

one who has wronged us; he calls us to forgive for our own sakes as well. Imagine what it is like to be deeply wronged by another: the memory of it is all-consuming; the pain of it is all-encompassing; the anger is all-powerful. We want the offender to feel the pain we feel, to know the havoc they have wreaked. All these responses are on the one hand, normal and human; but they are all-consuming, all-encompassing, all-powerful. Who wants to live for long with such intense negative feelings? Jesus commands us to forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, if need be, to rid ourselves of the poison of that negativity, to cleanse our own souls of the pain of our memories, to heal the open wounds of the past for our own sakes. We cannot live the life God hopes for us if we are consumed by our painful memories. That is the only way I and other commentators can make sense of the end of Jesus' parable, where God sends those who cannot forgive others to be tortured. Please understand that torture is not God's wish but rather God's consequence for those who cannot forgive: for to live with the open wound of unhealed memory is indeed torture. It is something we do to ourselves, not something God does to us.

Yes, forgiveness is something that happens by God's grace within the forgiver, and forgiveness is a journey that takes time to both honor and process a pain that is very real. This, then, is forgiveness: we can forgive from our heart whether or not we continue the friendship, whether or not we try again at marriage, whether or not we maintain the partnership. If we choose to rebuild a relationship, if we choose to trust again, we do so because the other person has responded in such a way as to make this seem possible. We do so

both with our eyes open, knowing it may not work out, and, as a person of hope, praying it will.

Do you understand? “Forgiveness can result in the rebuilding of a relationship or forgiveness can be the way we move beyond that relationship. Either way, when we forgive we set two prisoners free: the one who hurt us, and surprisingly enough, ourselves.” (Greg Bostrom)

When we forgive, said Lewis Smedes, “we change our future by as creative an act as any human being ever performs. When we forgive, we walk hand in hand with the God who is in the forgiveness business.” Forgive once? Seven times? Seventy-seven? Seventy times seven? We forgive as many times as it takes for us to follow our God from the bondage of the past into a future filled with hope. This is the good news of the gospel! In Jesus Christ we are forgiven; in Jesus Christ we can forgive! Amen.

SOURCES

Bostrom, Greg, “What Forgiveness Isn’t”, on Matthew 18:21-35.

Hare, Douglas, *Interpretation: Matthew*, John Knox Press.

James, Kathlyn, “The Justice of Forgiveness”, on Matthew 18:21-22.

Karen, Robert, “The Forgiving Self”, 2001.

Long, Tom, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew*.

Smedes, Lewis, *Forgive and Forget*.

Smedes, Lewis, *The Art of Forgiveness*.

Zanicky, Robert, “The Freeing of Forgiveness”, on Matthew 18:21-35.