

John Sampson
"Forgiveness"
Text: Matthew 18:21 - 35
Preached at KVCC
September 17, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

As we begin this reflection I ask you to invite into your awareness a person, or an event, or an experience that you have been struggling with...a place where you wonder if forgiveness is possible.

Hold this image right before you, and keep it in your consciousness as we consider our reading.

I'll share with you the image that I am holding in my heart. I'm holding the picture of my father. Because I am a survivor of child abuse. My father is a violent man, and he terrorized me, and my

sisters and my mother when I was growing up. I've spent my entire life trying to move past the experiences I had living with the man I named after.

I share this with you, not because I want to draw attention to myself and my struggle, but because I want you to know that I am in your boat. Like many of you, I struggle with a darkness that sits in my soul, which I haven't found a way to exorcise. And I want you to know that I know Jesus is asking us to do the hardest thing when he asks us to forgive each other.

I'll tell you a truth; I haven't forgiven my father for what he did to me, and to my family. Because of this I have felt at times like I live in a netherworld between being unable to make peace with my dad, and Jesus inviting me into a cycle of endless forgiveness.

What is that image that you allowed into your mind's eye?

What is that thing that you find so difficult to forgive?

Do you also find yourself living between the reality of the hurt and pain of your experience, and the ideal that Jesus calls us to?

While holding the images that challenge us in our consciousness we have to ask the most fundamental question.

What is forgiveness?

What is this thing that Jesus asks us to do?

What is forgiveness in the face of crime? What is forgiveness in the face of unspeakable acts of violence and selfishness? What does this word mean that so easily drops from the lips of Jesus?

I think forgiveness is not one thing, but many things. They're all related, but they're not all exactly the same. I have a couple of thoughts I'd like to share this morning, but they don't cover the full richness of the meaning of forgiveness. Forgive me if I don't follow a path that I introduce, that seems especially interesting and helpful to you.

Sometimes when we use the word forgiveness we refer to a process where we simply accept, on some level, the hurt that others visit upon us. We let their bad behavior go, and try to move on with our lives. You've heard the adage: forgive and forget? It's a saying that challenges us not only to move past the hurt, but to so radically reject the experience that there is no trace of it left even within our thoughts. It's as if the event, whatever it was, had never even happened.

I think if anyone can ever live into this type of forgiveness it is a forgiveness for superficial hurts, or perhaps a forgiveness that can only be extended to those one deeply loves. It's the kind of forgiveness that you show your friend who is chronically late, or your daughter when she spills her red wine on your new white rug, or your mother, who has done everything for you, and yet always brings attention to your weight.

Perhaps these are the kinds of experiences Jesus was thinking of when, "Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." For the mathematically challenged of us that equals 490 times.

Perhaps these are the moments and the relationships where we can forgive in the unlimited way Jesus says we are capable of within our

hearts. Perhaps we're not there yet, but we could grow to be able to show more mercy, more forgiveness, and more compassion to those who hurt us. Perhaps the image you have called before your heart is an experience that you can forgive, not just once, not ten times, but over and over and over again, maybe not today, but maybe one day.

But there are other types of experience aren't there?

Maybe some of you have conjured up experiences closer to the one I described that haunts me, and can never seemingly be driven out.

Perhaps some of you have lived through something, or are struggling with something even today, this morning, that you've run out of forgiveness for. Perhaps you'd like to be able to forgive, but the reality is there just isn't any more room in your heart to go there, there isn't any more of yourself you can make vulnerable, there's no more pain you can live through. You've come to the end, and so has your ability to forgive.

It is for all of us who struggle with a hurt that upends our very sense of self that Jesus tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It's a story whose general message we can recognize from our own lives, and our own society all these years after it was first shared. It's simple enough. A servant who owes more than he can ever repay is forgiven by his debtor in an act of mercy that seems almost unbelievable, only to turn around and selfishly reject the opportunity to pay this grace forward. If there is something in this story that may seem unreal it is that the unforgiving servant is ultimately punished for his lack of charity, that his deeds ultimately catch up with him. Because isn't the opposite so often the way of the world?

But we miss the wisdom of the authors of Matthew if we too quickly move through this story of the king and his servant and hear the last

words of the parable as if they were an extension of Jesus' invitation to forgive 490 times.

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

If we pass over the rich meat of the story of the king and his servant it might seem like Jesus shares an ethic where those of us who limit our forgiveness are condemned.

If we move too quickly we miss the fact that the king only forgave his servant once.

He only forgave him once before he punished his servant and demanded that he pay what had previously been forgiven.

The king didn't follow Jesus' invitation to forgive 490 times; he didn't forgive even Peter's more modest seven times.

He forgave only once.

We miss the wisdom of the authors of Matthew if we too quickly move through this entire reading and try to collapse the unlimited forgiveness Jesus describes, and the more limited forgiveness of the king, into each other.

Because they're not the same thing.

I said that I thought the parable about the king and the unforgiving servant was written for those of us who struggle to respond to the trauma that haunts our lives, for those of us who would like to forgive and just can't at this moment, or maybe ever.

This is a parable for us because it says there can be a limit to forgiveness. That there are some actions that we shouldn't suck up as if they didn't happen, and there are some things we can't forget. And that to forgive, to stay in relationship with those people or situations that are so toxic to us, would harm us, and put us in jeopardy. And that God doesn't wish that for any of us.

I have broken with my father. I haven't spoken to him in decades, and that has allowed me to begin a journey of healing and of establishing my own personhood free from fear and intimidation. I feel like I now have a life of possibility and hope. Do you also share this reality that to move out of relationship with a harmful environment has helped you? Have you found that to put a limit on forgiveness, and the relationship it demands, has actually benefitted you, and invited justice and accountability into your life and those around you? This is inline with an image of God that runs through the stories and prayers of the Bible. God is seen as a God of mercy

and forgiveness, but also as a God of justice and a God who creates and enforces boundaries.

The authors of Matthew gave us the two parts of our reading today, the opening of Jesus encouraging us towards a path of unceasing forgiveness, and a parable that puts a limit on forgiveness as something that is just and right, not so that we will erase the differences between these two messages, but that we will recognize that they are both holy strategies for responding to others who wrong us, and hurt us.

And they point to the fact that our lives aren't lived at one pole or the other, they are lived in the gray middle ground where forgiveness and accountability are both in play and it is up to us to forgive and remain in relationship where we can, but also to have the option of not forgiving, and of even breaking with another person, where it is necessary. This question of when to forgive and

when to break is a question not of the elimination of one option in favor of the other, but a question of balance and nuance between two possibilities held in tension.

But I would also invite us to remember our reading from last week when we think of what Jesus means by forgiveness. In the reading we heard that comes just before today's passage Jesus says that when we are wronged we should engage the one who has sinned against us and tell the truth about the effect of our brother's actions. And we keep telling our story to larger and larger groups of people if there is no change in behavior, hoping that the one who has wronged us can ultimately make a change. Unfortunately, my father has never been able to change. Perhaps those who you are holding in your consciousness right now have also been unable to alter their behavior to allow for reconciliation. In the end, if there is no change Jesus allows for a redefinition of our relationship if we continue to be hurt. What's key to last week's reading in the context of today's

reflection is that Jesus never tells us we should just grin and bear it. That's not what forgiveness is about. For those of us who are victims of people and situations that harm us our teacher tells us that it is good and right to actively fight for ourselves, and actively ask for help from those around us to stop the harm we are experiencing. We pursue forgiveness and reconciliation, but in the vision of Jesus there is also a limit, and that limit is there for our own wellbeing and health.

Come back to the image you are holding in your heart, the one you've been focused on throughout this reflection. Jesus asks you to forgive if that is possible, perhaps not today, but someday. But he is also telling you that God loves you and if you need to draw a boundary, and make a limit, then do so. Because you, and I – we are all the ***beloved*** children of God.

AMEN.