

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A LIFE OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

21Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, 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. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow

slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

DIAGNOSIS: Making Sin and Forgiveness Count

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We Make Frustrated Attempts to Enumerate and Limit Our Acts of Forgiveness*

Jesus has just finished describing forgiveness between church members as a process by which the injured member confronts the offender about the wrong. If the offender listens, one has regained a co-member back into the body of Christ. This is a painful and difficult process for all involved. So Peter wants to know, “How often do I need to do this? Once, twice, seven times?” His question assumes that sins can be counted and, therefore, that forgiveness can be counted. We use this sin-counting system all the time at school and at work and even at play: “Three strikes and you’re out.” Perhaps Peter suggests the more generous number of seven for the church as a good symbolic number signifying completion, as in, “OK, that’s enough. You’ve exceeded your limit and we are done with you. There will be no more confrontation, listening, confessing, repenting, and reconciling. You are out.” But Jesus’ answer messes up this whole idea that sin and forgiveness are calculable. When Jesus tells Peter that he has not taught him to forgive seven times but 77 times, Jesus is taking the number of completion, multiplying it by ten and then adding another seven, thereby negating the completion and moving the whole discussion into the realm of infinity. Sin and forgiveness are not about numbers. After all, can one really capture and confine the full consequences of either sin or forgiveness? When does a sin

“end”? When does forgiveness “end,” so that one can say, “That counts as one time, six to go.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Reality Is that We Need Incalculable Forgiveness and Transformation Ourselves*

If forgiveness is not about counting, then what is it about? Up until now, with Peter, we have put ourselves in the role of the forgiver. But when he explains the scope of forgiveness, Jesus tells a story that puts us in the role of the one who needs to be forgiven. We are suddenly a slave who has borrowed such massive amounts from his king that he owes the equivalent of 150,000 years of labor. He cannot even begin to make payment on it. So, obviously he has wasted his life and the king's property, and the impact is not only to the seventh generation, but almost to 77 generations. Jesus tells us that the king of the story represents God, the one who made the whole earth and placed us here to tend it and each other in it. Like the slave's sin in the story, our sin cannot be counted. There is no way to specify where the impact of our sin ends in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, and increasingly in the non-human creation. The king's first impulse is to banish the slave and cut off their relationship. But when the slave begs not to be separated, the king has compassion and forgives the entire debt in order to stay connected with the slave. Like the debt, the forgiveness given is incalculable. The king has not made a one-time transaction with the slave, but has opened up a whole new way of relating together. It is as if the king said, “Let's stop counting. You owe an uncountable debt and I give uncountable forgiveness. Let's make it an infinite zero and begin to live on different terms with each other.” When we are confronted with our sin and ask not to be cut off and are forgiven, the king's new way assumes change on our parts, the transformation of our lives and relationships in the community. That is what it means

to live as a forgiven person. It is not the same as being simply let off the hook.

But living in a new way with God as forgiven ones is just as difficult as living in a new way with ourselves and with other people as forgiving ones. It would be easier if sin and forgiveness were about keeping score, not about transformed lives and relationships in the community. Like the slave in the story, we just want to be let off the hook, not changed. We get a glimpse of the kind of carelessness that the slave has taken with God's beloved creation as soon as he steps out of the king's presence. Immediately, he sees another slave who owes him about three and a half months' wages. He throttles him, demanding payment, and will neither have patience nor forgive the debt, but throws him into prison and disengages from him. When we have a choice between keeping our lifestyle by rejecting another member of the church who has somehow offended us, or working things out with that other member even if it means changing our lifestyle, do we not, like this slave, choose to keep the lifestyle and reject the person?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Our Rejection of the Life of Forgiveness Leads to God's Imposition of the Infinite Consequences of Sin*

The other slaves grieve for the loss of their brother and report this to the king. The king calls us in, saying, "I have just showed you the magnitude of your sin and I have forgiven you. But you do not understand forgiveness. You do not live in forgiveness. So I will make you feel the consequences of your sin and of what you do to others. You will know what it is like to be cut off. You will know what it is like to have your community torn apart." In this way God threatens to hold us accountable for all the damage we have done, no matter how torturous it is to us. Furthermore, since sin is incalculable, this accounting will be infinite. At this point the story is

over; it is not a happy ending.

PROGNOSIS: Letting Jesus Count

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Experiences the Consequences of Sin Because He Is Hanging on to Us*

But now the focus shifts back to the teller of the story: Jesus. He is just about to enter Jerusalem, but not alone. He is entering with Peter, whom he has just convicted, and us, convicted with Peter. In Jerusalem, Jesus himself is arrested, tried, and convicted of trying to be the king. He is crucified between two other convicts. Unlike us, Jesus refuses to separate himself from sinners, even if it means that he comes to be considered a sinner himself. So Jesus feels all the things that God said we would feel if we do not have mercy on others. Jesus is tortured and cut off from relationship with God and with his community. He dies shouting, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). But God has not forsaken him. Rather, in Jesus, God is refusing to separate from us. God is making a new way of relating to us. For God will not allow Jesus, and all of us offenders to whom Jesus is clinging, to remain dead. God raises Jesus to a new life, and all of us with him.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Have New Life in Jesus as God's Infinitely Forgivable Sons and Daughters*

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus is clear that God is his father and ours. When we live in Jesus' life, we live no longer as the slaves of the story, but as sons and daughters of God. We are related to God by blood, water, and Spirit, and thus God has bound us together forever. In his last meal with the disciples, Jesus gave them a cup of wine to share, saying, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). After his resurrection, Jesus told his followers to baptize all peoples "in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We who are identified with Jesus are buried and raised with him in baptism, and in this way our lives are transformed as a gift of God and no longer as a command. God will not cast us away, but will pursue, confront, forgive, and work things out with us when we have sinned, up to infinity. And, in faith, we experience daily repentance and forgiveness.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Have Inseparable Brothers and Sisters in a Life of Forgiveness*

This daily experience of living with God in repentance and forgiveness also means that all those others whom Jesus won't let go of are also sons and daughters of God, and our brothers and sisters by blood, water, and Spirit. Disowning them is not ours to choose. Here the Old Testament lesson gives us a beautiful example of Joseph, who would not make his guilty brothers his slaves, but forgave them because God had worked things out for, within, and between them (Genesis 50:15-21). "We are the Lord's," Paul reminds us, and each will be upheld by the Lord who is able to make us stand (Romans 14:4 and 8). The Lord's method is the lifelong maturing of relationship through conflict and confrontation, confession and repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, and on to a changed life together. Because this is life itself, it is immeasurable, incalculable, unpredictable, and priceless.