

Unforgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

We live in a culture that is unforgiving. Many of you remember that almost a year ago, College Game Day came to Iowa State for the Iowa/Iowa State game. One of the people who gained attention there was Carson King, whose sign asking for beer money attracted so much attention that it became a sensation and raised almost \$3 million for the University of Iowa's Children's Hospital. In researching the story, though, Des Moines Register reporter Aaron Calvin discovered some offensive tweets from years earlier. After those were reported, King apologized and deleted the tweets, but the damage was done. Others looking online soon found the reporter had some offensive tweets of his own, and he found himself out of a job. Both young men were forgiven by some, but unforgiven by others.

That cancel culture continues to come after all sorts of people. No apology seems sincere or broad enough, no reputation pure enough to remain unsullied. From government officials to retail workers and everyone in-between, people make mistake, and are left unforgiven by a culture that doesn't understand moral accountability outside of looking for an impossible balancing of the books.

Today we hear Peter wonder how many times to forgive. He thinks that seven should be the limit of how many times he should forgive. For us, even seven seems excessive. We learn from adages like "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me" and "three strikes and you're out" about how many times we should forgive. Seven seems to be an excessive amount of times to forgive.

Seven isn't an excessive amount of times to forgive for Jesus, though. Jesus doesn't just tell Peter to forgive instead seventy seven or four hundred ninety times. Jesus also tells a story, so that Peter, the other disciples, and we can learn from the example in the story.

A servant owes a king a huge debt, not quite as big as the national debt, but big enough that the servant couldn't pay it off himself in a hundred years. When he appeals to the king for mercy, the king gives it to him. The servant goes off, and meets a fellow servant who owes a couple weeks' wages. Instead of learning from the example of the king, the first servant refuses to show mercy. When the king learns of this, the forgiveness is withdrawn. We learn from a story the importance of forgiveness, and the example of forgiveness.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, from Matthew 18, debt is a synonym for sin. For the people of Jesus' day, just as of our own, debt was a part of their everyday life. They knew how easy it was to fall into debt by living beyond their means. They knew how that debt could become all consuming, affecting everything in their lives. They could even be sold into slavery for their debts. And so debt as a synonym for sin is not unique to this parable. Some translations of the Lord's Prayer remind us that we are to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.

The problem is that when we think about sin as debt, we think about forgiveness like an accountant. We think about it as something that we have to repay, that we can work to repay if we could try. But that of course does not show the massive debt that we owe. If God were an accountant, we would be perpetually in debt.

Not only do we owe God for everything that we have, but we are massively in debt because of the way that we waste what we have been given. We waste our time, we waste our money, and we waste our talents. Like the many Americans who are in credit card and mortgage debt, all that our waste does is get us more in debt.

But when we talk about sin as debt, we realize how foolish God's grace really is. The way that God forgives our debts is not the way that we would use to run a business. I have never taken a business class, but even I know that writing off a ten million dollar debt seems like an easy way for you to lose your own company. Yet it is in forgiving that debt that we see God work. We see God working in a way that seems foolish to the world. We see God working in a new way, and that sets us up to see the differences between the way of God, the way of foolishness, the way of the cross, and the way of the world. That parable focuses us on the massive debt that God has forgiven us, and the smaller debts that we hold on to ourselves.

It also shows us how easy it is for us to hold onto the way that we are used to doing things instead of changing after being forgiven. It shows us how we can remain in our old lives instead of living in the new way of God's forgiveness. The unforgiving servant cannot conceive of so massive a debt being forgiven. There is no way that he would ever do that, so there is no way that it could ever happen to him. Even when it does happen, even when grace and forgiveness break into his life, he is left with his old way of doing things, his old way of keeping track of everyone's debt. He is unable to change, and leaves himself stuck in the old way of doing things.

If that's not enough, we hear in today's Old Testament lesson the culmination of the Joseph story. Joseph, of Technicolor Dreamcoat fame, is eleventh of twelve sons born to Jacob. He has several dreams that show his brothers bowing down to him, and when he tells his brothers about it, they throw him into a well and sell him into slavery.

Eventually, Joseph becomes an assistant to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and helps them through a long period of famine. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt, but don't recognize Joseph. Joseph forgives them, but the brothers worry that's only because their father is there. Now that their father has died, they think that Joseph is going to get even with them. They are finally going to get what they deserve.

Joseph doesn't live in the world of justice and getting even. Joseph had forgiven his brothers when he first revealed his identity to them, and that forgiveness hadn't changed with the death of their father. The brothers could hardly believe it, but they experienced forgiveness they didn't deserve.

Stories about the power of forgiveness aren't just found in the Bible. Many of you know I have two daughters, and that means I spend a lot of my free time watching princess movies. But one recently came with a surprising message. Princess Elena of Avalor was a series on Disney Junior that just aired its series finale last month. Elena had finally reached the age of maturity and was poised to be crowned queen. But she had one last test to pass before she could be crowned. Her cousin, Esteban, had betrayed her several times, and she held onto a grudge for those betrayals so much that she left her coronation preparations to go try to stop him and his magic allies. But after Esteban

realized the cost all of his schemes had, he sacrifices himself to save Elena. That act allows Elena to forgive Esteban for all of his treachery, and the power of the forgiveness is what defeats the evil spirits and allows for a happy series finale.

Forgiveness is what allows us to have happy endings to our stories, as well. Forgiveness brings people together whose relationships have been damaged by sin and resentment.

Forgiveness brings us back to God. Despite all that pushes us to hold onto grudges and be unforgiving, we need to remember all that we have been forgiven of, what a gift we have received. Beginning there, we can bring the world together.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
September 13, 2020