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Matthew 18:21-35
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Forgive us our sins, as we forgive...

Forgiveness is high on the list of words that come with a ton of baggage. We're more comfortable talking about God's capacity to forgive than our own. We trust in a God who welcomes all, forgives all, and frees all. We seek to rest in the knowledge that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

Yet, even that's a question up for debate – "Does God forgive Adolf Hitler? Or, Chile's Augusto Pinochet? Or, Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda?" Both "yes" and "no" come with some challenging implications. I'm more comfortable leaving those answers up to God.

When it comes to forgiveness on human terms, it gets even trickier. There are some situations where it seems perfectly acceptable to hold off on forgiveness – a friend's betrayal, an unfaithful partner, a colleague who lies, cheats and steals. In life and death situations, such as bullying, abuse and torture, it seems even clearer that forgiveness can wait.

I find myself thinking (and occasionally saying) things that sound a whole lot like Lyle Lovett in his song, "God Will."

Who keeps on trusting you
When you've been cheating
And spending your nights on the
town
And who keeps on saying that
he still wants you
When you're through running
around
And who keeps on loving you
When you've been lying

Saying things ain't what they
seem
God does
But I don't
God will
But I won't
And that's the difference
Between God and me

We, and Lyle Lovett, acknowledge that God's capacity to forgive is overwhelmingly greater than ours, which is fantastic because it means we are almost assuredly granted forgiveness for the things we do, and since God takes care of the forgiveness we can take our time stepping into – or, even avoid all together – the messy process of letting go.

The thing is, when we do this...our grudges become as familiar as our friendships; anger comes easier than compassion; and, new relationships become impossible – or at least shallower – until we can release our grasp on the past.

I found myself longing this week for a complicated parable from Jesus...one that had a little less clarity and a little less obvious challenge. Unfortunately, we won't find any of that in this Gospel lesson. Mind you, I've tried to look for a loophole or two...something that would give us permission to claim our imperfect humanity by letting God focus on the difficult acts of forgiveness, while we deal out absolution on small things – like getting the wrong kind of peanut butter...showing up late for coffee...or, throwing a red sock in with the white clothes.

The problem is...there are no loopholes. And, to make matters worse, each week we pray that God will enact this parable in our lives.

But, before we take on that, let's set the scene again.

The disciples at this point in Matthew are trying to figure out how to live in community...how to faithfully be the Body of Christ – knowing that there will be times of trial and disorientation...knowing that people will sin against each other (both knowingly and unknowingly)...knowing that differing theologies and interpretations of the Word of God will cause tension and dissention.

In an attempt to address this part of the journey, Peter asks Jesus “How many times should I forgive my sister or brother who sins against me?” And, thinking he's guessing high...Peter continues, “as many as seven times?”

I mean, surely that's enough forgiveness for the people who challenge a believer's faithfulness...or always complain about the way things are done...or set limits on the identity of those welcomed into God's embrace. Peter might be thinking that it's possible that seven times might be about six too many.

But...no...Jesus says it's more. It's seventy times seven...or seventy-seven – scholars disagree about the Greek. But, the reality is that the numbers don't matter. You can't create a spreadsheet, and there's not an “app” for tracking how many times someone is forgiven. Jesus' point is that you can't calculate forgiveness. And, to show how absolutely absurd it is to do so, Jesus tells this parable...

There's this king, and he wants to settle the accounts he has with his slaves. One of them comes in owing 10,000 talents. How much is 10,000 talents? It's 3,000 lifetimes of salary for an average wage earner. That's not just getting behind on a few bills or buying a few more things on credit than you should...you have to work hard to get that far in the red. Knowing there's absolutely no way this man will ever be able to pay him, the king orders him sold...along with his family and everything he owns.

This slave falls down before the king...pleading for the king's patience and a chance to redeem the debt on his own. The king is moved to compassion by the man's desperation, so much so, that he doesn't just “give the man another chance,” but the king forgives everything...wipes it clean...nothing else is owed.

Then, the slave – the same one, Jesus wants us to know...the same one whose life – and the lives of the next 150 generations of his family who would have to work full time to pay off the debt – has been freed...that slave walks out of the castle and runs into a fellow slave who owed him some money – 100 days worth of pay.

For one who pays most of their earnings to the king, this is not an insignificant debt. It would take a while to pay off, albeit not 150,000 years like the forgiven slave, but it would take a while.

Peter and the disciples and you and I are expecting the best out of the forgiven one, especially as he encounters his brothers and sisters in the community. And, yet, it is not to be. He grabs his colleague by the throat...demanding immediate payment. The man drops to the ground and repeats the same words the forgiven slave cried out before the king, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” The forgiven slave, unlike the king, was not moved to compassion. He grabbed the debtor and threw him in jail, until the debt could be paid in full.

Members of the community who witness this troubling scene – especially in light of the unfathomable gift the king had just given to the forgiven slave – go before the king to testify about what happened.

The king is furious...wondering how in the world this one who was forgiven such an immense debt was not moved to mercy by the same plea from one who owed (comparatively) so little. The (previously) forgiven slave had not been changed...he didn't grasp the enormity of the gift...his heart was not open to the abundant grace.

For him, it became a matter of numbers...the forgiven one no longer had to worry about any numbers next to his name, but by golly, he was going to make sure he got what he was owed by others. When the king realizes that they are not grounded in the same foundation of compassion and grace, he withdraws his forgiveness and sentences this debtor to a lifetime (or more) of torture until the entire debt is paid.

And, on the off chance Peter didn't get what Jesus was saying, he promises that God will do the same to him and the disciples and you and me if we do not forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts.

And, as I started to say earlier, if that weren't enough to help us get it, Jesus threw this calling into the prayer he taught us to pray...“forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” I wish that wording were slightly different, as I sure would rather try to forgive like God does, rather than be forgiven like I do.

But, see, that's the kind of thinking that wonders if seven times is enough. That's the kind of thinking that puts emphasis on reciprocity, rather than compassion. That's the kind of thinking that puts forgiveness in the realm of the head, instead of the heart.

Forgiveness isn't easy...it can't happen when we're still trapped by the sinner's actions; and, it can't happen if we think we are the ones in control. Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning actions or letting people escape accountability for their actions.

What is it then? Presbyterian minister, writer, and retreat leader Marjorie Thompson writes:

“To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment maybe. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem...Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken.” (Moving toward Forgiveness, Weavings, March-April 1992, 19.)

We cannot forgive others without God's gift of freedom to us. And, God cannot forgive us without our willingness to open our hearts to God's grace that inevitably overflows out of us and onto others.

I wish that I could stand up here and tell you the secret to breaking out of the prisons of anger and frustration and sadness that each of us find ourselves in from time to time...the secret to forgiving seventy seven times...or seventy times seven times....or, even, forgiving people always, as a way of life.

But, there's no step-by-step process to bring about the ability to forgive. Some say it is not something we do, but rather something we “discover” (Reconciliation by Robert Schreiter).

And, you know what, I can tell you about discovering forgiveness...

About 11 years ago now, my brother stopped talking to everyone in our family. Attempts to contact him were futile. He returned mail unopened, hung up the

phone if we called, and either ignored emails or responded with language that isn't appropriate to repeat anywhere, much less here.

I felt both intense frustration and intense grief, but I dwelt mostly in the world of anger. I wanted him to know how it felt to be treated with this kind of contempt. Though, with no outlet to express it to him, the anger festered within me and ate away at my spirit.

A few years later, when he reconnected with my parents – but not me, I found myself falling into step with the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son...questioning – aloud (and multiple times) – “How in the world can you welcome him back, after all that he’s said and done...after the way that he’s treated you and me?”

As I listened to myself, I knew that I had to find a way to let go of the pain and hurt, but I couldn't do it...I couldn't find the strength and courage within me. I had to ask for help.

On the third Sunday of every month at the Rec, we set out candles that people are invited to come forward to light during the silence in our communal prayer time.

Each month, I went forward to light a candle for Jeff – that he would come around, that he would show up or call, that he would apologize for what he had done. I thought that his return would make all of my feelings of frustration go away.

After about two years (yes...it did take that long!), I went up to light a candle one Sunday, and I realized that the anger was gone...deep love and longing for reconnection welled up within me. God freed me from the burden of holding onto my anger, and in so doing, freed Jeff from the judgment that I was continuing to heap upon him.

God hadn't brought Jeff around...God had brought me around.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that “Forgiveness will not be possible until compassion is born in your heart.” My prayer for all of us is that our hearts will be open to this new life. Amen.