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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“As We Forgive”

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Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then 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?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, 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. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But 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." 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

"As We Forgive"

Matthew 18:21-35

It's another Sunday morning, and the list of things you could be doing right now is long and varied.

Hiking. Biking. Sailing. Reading. Studying. Playing. And, of course, sleeping.

But you're here. Don't get me wrong, I'm very glad you're here, but the fact that my list only scratches the surface of all the other to spend a Sunday morning begs the question: why? Why are you here? Why have you chosen to spend this morning in worship?

Not long ago, Pope Francis addressed this question.

People who go to church, he said,

"don't do it because they think they are
or want to appear *better* than others,
but because they recognize they need
to be *accepted* and *regenerated* by the mercy of God."

He goes on, "If each of us does not feel in need of God's mercy,
if we don't feel like sinners, it would be better not to go...

We go...because we are sinners and we want to receive Jesus' promise."¹

Now I'm not sure how many of us woke up this morning with a keen awareness that we are sinners, with a longing for God's mercy and forgiveness. It's probably closer to the truth that we woke up with a longing for that first sip of coffee or that first bite of breakfast or that first breath of fresh air. And maybe, as you sit here thinking about it, you're realizing that the reason you came to church was to see people or hear beautiful music or just to have somewhere to go and something to do today. Maybe the reason you're here today has nothing to do with forgiveness.

But, theologically speaking, Pope Francis is right.

We come to worship to honor God with our presence
and our time and our attention,

but we also come to worship hoping against hope that we will be saved.

We may not be entirely comfortable with the language of salvation,

but salvation is what the pope is talking about when he says that
we go to church because we are sinners
who want to receive Jesus' promise.

What is that promise? Salvation.

And what is salvation?

My friend and colleague Mark Ramsey offered an excellent explanation of salvation in a recent sermon.

Salvation, he said, is about the past and the future:

"Salvation is the transformation of the past from a burden to a gift —
from grief and regret
to wisdom and joy.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr5O9C0-hno>

“And salvation is the transformation of the future from a place of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, to a time of hope and promise.

“When we talk about salvation of the past we call it forgiveness of sins. When we talk about salvation of the future we call it eternal life.”²

Whether we want to admit it or not, we come to church hoping against hope for the gift of salvation, forgiveness and eternal life.

If only salvation was a one-time, discrete event, and we could point to the exact moment that it happened.
This is the moment my past was transformed,
this is the moment my future became bright.
This is the moment everything changed.

We love that kind of clarity.

We long for easy answers, for clear definitions.

We want to know ahead of time exactly how much things are going to cost us: how much time, how much money, how much energy...and the tasks of our life of faith are no different.

Salvation — transformation of our past and future — sounds great.

But what is it going to cost us?

“If someone offends me,” Peter asks Jesus, “exactly how many times do I have to forgive? Seven times?”

Peter is looking for a good number, not too low, but not too high either. Seven seems about right, plus it has the advantage of being a sacred number; God created the world in seven days, after all, and a week’s worth of forgiveness seems to him like it ought to be enough for just about any offense.

But Jesus isn’t looking for the perfect number when it comes to forgiveness. Jesus is looking at our hearts.

“Not seven times,” Jesus says. Then he gives a number which is usually translated as seventy-seven but which could also have been seventy *times* seven, or four hundred and ninety. I’m not sure the exact number matters, because the point Jesus is making is that you can’t put a number to forgiveness. It takes what it takes.

And what forgiveness takes from us is a lot.

There has been a lot of chatter in the media this week about Ray and Janay Rice. He is the now former star running back of the Baltimore Ravens who lost his job because an incident in which he beat his then fiancé Janay unconscious was caught on tape. She has the unwelcome distinction of being the most analyzed woman in America this week.

On Monday, a website released a silent version of the three-minute video in which Ray beats Janay unconscious and then drags her from an elevator. Tuesday morning, Janay posted the

² Mark Ramsey, “Always (*New Healing*),” Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, August 10, 2014.

following on Instagram:

“No one knows the pain that the media...has caused my family. To make us relive a moment in our lives that we regret every day is a horrible thing. If your intentions were to hurt us, embarrass us, make us feel alone, take all happiness away, you’ve succeeded...”

One reporter paraphrased her argument as: “Why is the howl from the Internet mob causing the league to take away my husband’s livelihood when I have forgiven him?”³

Janay claims that she has forgiven Ray, whom she married after the incident in the video, but this week a lot of people have questioned whether that’s really true. And this has, understandably, made her angry. Because forgiveness is hard. It’s hard enough to prove to ourselves that we have finally been able to forgive someone who has offended us, but even harder to prove to others. Forgiveness costs us.

Forgiveness costs us...which is probably why we so often use financial metaphors to talk about it. In this parable and in many others, Jesus talks about forgiveness in the language of money — specifically, in terms of debt.

We Presbyterians speak of forgiveness in these terms every time we say the Lord’s prayer: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

The parable Jesus tells about forgiveness turns that Lord’s Prayer formula around and asks us what it would look like if we forgive our debtors as God has forgiven us.

Typically, Jesus uses parables in ways that are terribly confusing. It is as if he wants to confound those who listen to him, to turn assumptions on their heads, to help people see things in a whole new way.

But the parable we heard today is ridiculously straightforward.

Maybe that’s because Jesus knows that forgiveness is anything but straightforward. It is a thing that resists simple formulas — it even resists complicated formulas. Of all the elements of a life of faith, forgiveness might just be the one that resists and defies all the answers and good intentions and efforts we throw at it.

So, in response to Peter’s question that tries to pin forgiveness down,

Jesus tells this story of a slave who owes a debt to the king,
a debt of ten thousand talents.

It might be lost on us today, but those who first heard Jesus tell this story
would probably have busted out laughing when they heard
the size of the slave’s debt.

One talent then was the equivalent of
15 years of wages for the average worker.

Ten thousand talents was the equivalent of 150,000 years of wages.

In other words, this slave owed the king a gazillion dollars,
a debt too big to ever pay off.

When the slave left the king, not having been told
that he could have a little more time to come up with the money,
not having been told

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/us/your-evening-briefing.html>

that he would only have to pay half the debt or a quarter of it,
but having been completely released from the entire,
ridiculously huge debt,
he ran into a fellow slave,
who owed him the equivalent of 100 days wages.
And when that man couldn't pay up right then and there,
he had him thrown into jail.

What does this tell us about the condition of the first man's heart?

In her poem "Watching You Hold Your Hatred," Alice Walker wryly comments on the burden we bear when we are unable to forgive:

Watching you hold your hatred for such a long time
I wonder: Isn't it slippery?
Might you not someday drop it on yourself?
I wonder: Where does it sleep if ever?
And where do you deposit it while you feed your children
or sit in the lap of the one who cherishes you?
There is no graceful way to carry hatred.
While hidden it is everywhere.⁴

Forgiveness costs us.

But *not* forgiving, holding on to hatred, nursing that grudge —
that costs us too, perhaps even more than forgiveness ever could.

We come to church longing for salvation.

Longing for our past to be transformed from burden to gift.
Longing for our future to be transformed from
a place of fear to a place of hope.

We come wanting and needing to be saved.

And the cost of that salvation
is that we must receive God's forgiveness
and extend that forgiveness to others.

Jesus knows just how hard that is.

He also knows that the only way to do it is to begin,
knowing you will have to do it over and over and over again,
just as God does for us.

Raymond Carver was a writer who knew a few things about the cost of forgiveness. His personal life was full of brokenness: a failed marriage, struggles with addiction, inability to hold a job. My favorite story of his is called "A Small Good Thing." It is about a mother and a father whose son, Scotty, is hit by a car while he is walking to school on his birthday. After three days in the hospital during which his parents barely leave his side, Scotty dies.

During those three days while their son was still alive but unconscious, every time one of the parents returned home, they received strange phone calls. Sometimes the voice on the other

⁴ Alice Walker, *Hard Times Require Dancing*. New World Library, 2010.

end said nothing, there was just the sound of breathing and then a hang up, but sometimes it said something truly disturbing, like, "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" or "Your Scotty, I got him ready for you. Did you forget him?"

First, Scotty's parents were confused and a little afraid, but then they got angry. Who was torturing them like this?

Finally, after a call came just before midnight on the day that Scotty died, the mother realized who it was: the baker from whom she had ordered Scotty's birthday cake, which she was supposed to have picked up on Monday morning.

Filled with righteous anger, they drove to the bakery in the middle of the night and pounded on the door until the baker answered. At first, the baker tried to get rid of them, but then he recognized the mother. "Oh, you decided you want your cake?"

Scotty's mother stood there, burning with anger.

The baker was angry too, angry that he had to work so hard, at all hours of the day and night, just to make ends meet. Angry that people would order something and then fail to pick it up and pay for it.

Then Scotty's parents told the baker what had happened. That Scotty had been hit by a car on Monday morning. That they had been waiting with him until he died. That now he was dead.

At first the baker couldn't even speak. Then he put down his rolling pin, took off his apron, and cleared off a small table. "Please, sit down," he said. He said how very sorry he was about their son. "Please," he said, "let me ask if you can find it in your hearts to forgive me?"

Then Scotty's parents took off their coats and sat down at the table and let the baker feed them. For three days they had barely eaten. Now they watched the baker pull cinnamon rolls out of the oven and put them on the table. They ate the warm rolls and drank the coffee he gave them and listened to what the baker had to say. They listened as he talked about his loneliness and doubt. About what it had been like to be childless all these years. They watched as he broke open a loaf of dark, rich bread and let them smell and taste it.

In the last paragraph of the story, Carver writes "They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread...They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving."⁵

People blunder through life.

They do and say things that hurt us, sometimes terribly and irrevocably.

Do we forgive them? Sometimes.

Is it hard? Always.

We blunder through life too.

We do and say things that hurt people, sometimes terribly and irrevocably.

Do they forgive us? Sometimes.

Does God forgive us?

Always.

Always.⁶ Amen.

⁵ Raymond Carver, "A Small Good Thing," *Cathedral*, Vintage, 1989. It was Mark Ramsey's use of this story in the sermon cited above that reminded me of it and prompted me to use it here.

⁶ Mark Ramsey, op. cit.



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.