

I Can't Count That High  
United Church of Broomfield  
September 17, 2023

Matthew 18: 21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> 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.' <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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Many of us enact this parable weekly if not daily when we pray the Lord's prayer and say forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Depending upon the denomination or one's history, it can be sins or trespasses instead of debt/debtors; we're equal opportunists here who like to mix it up, so we've used it all.

Matthew remembers that when Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, he used a word that means, debt, the same word that's used in this story to indicate something owed and paid or not paid back. But the story and prayer are talking more broadly about sin and forgiveness, that's clear from the context. Jesus tells the story in response to Peter's question, "if a church member sins against me how often should I forgive?" A more modern version of the Lord's prayer underlines this broad emphasis -it suggests we pray forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

There are resources that focus on children or youth and young adults that help to simplify biblical concepts. A Presbyterian resource offers this for forgiveness and the Lord's Prayer; it says telling God we're sorry we ask God not to hold our sins against us but to accept us again by grace and we are to forgive others just as God has forgiven us.

For youth and young adults, it says that when we pray, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. We pray that a new and right spirit will be put within us. We ask for the grace to treat others, especially those who harm us, with the same mercy that we have received from God. We remember that not one day goes by when we do not need to turn humbly to God for our own forgiveness. We know that our reception of this forgiveness can be blocked by our unwillingness to forgive others. We ask that we will not delight in doing evil nor in avenging any wrong, but that we will survive all cruelty without bitterness and overcome evil with good so that our hearts will be knit together with the mercy and forgiveness of God.

It can be really beneficial to utilize children's or youth Bibles and commentaries because they really break it down for us. Why the need to forgive? Because someone has harmed you. Because you yourself have screwed things up more times than you can count. Because you resist on some level doing even what you know is good for you; we all do. Because evil is multifaceted, and people can be cruel. And wanting revenge is real and natural and we're inclined to feel bitter when we've suffered some kind of wrong. So, when Jesus tells us to forgive 77 times; when he insists that we must forgive from the heart - that can be hard to hear let alone do. I'm sorry, I just can't count that high. Or, I *won't*.

Sometimes it isn't as hard as we think.

There is a story where a man described the depression that had followed his divorce. How could she do something like this to me, said a voice in his head, every day all the time. Thankfully, he had great people around him supporting him. But forgiveness eluded him. Then one day at work he had to enter a new password to get on to the computer server. He knew he would have to reenter this password multiple times per day for the next thirty days and something prompted him to write, "forgive her," using a 3 for the E in her. "Forgive her" is what he typed every time his computer locked, every time his screen saver (with her photo) appeared, every time he came back from eating lunch alone. Forgive her, forgive her, forgive her he typed. And in time he says it changed the way he looked at his ex-wife. It helped him to accept the way that things had happened at the end of his marriage. It changed his mood. After a while he changed the password slightly; "I forgive her," he typed, day after day, until he did.

Sometimes forgiveness surprises us, comforts us, even the lights us. Other times it doesn't. The pain is too great, the anger is too encompassing. People may want to forgive but try as they might, over and over, they can't. That's part of the pain of the world; part of the billions of dollars we collectively owe and cannot repay. It's part of what we confess sometimes - what we pray God will lift for us and from us.

Our difficulty forgiving and the complications around our forgiving are part of the reality we face as God's Kin-dom is not yet here. Jesus told the story of the king and servants to show what the Kin-dom of God will be like. What do we say about the Kin-dom? We say it is now and not yet. We may see glimmers of it now, but we pray for it to come more fully. God's Kin-dom is something for which we hope and here's the hope we have in light of Christ's description; first that in God's Kin-dom, forgiveness is vast and easy. Impossible debts are forgiven just like that and we're free. What's more, in God's Kin-dom, nobody gets to use their freedom to oppress anybody else. No one will be able to abuse their power that way. That's how Christ promised God's Kin-dom is and will be.

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The Biden-Harris Student Debt Relief plan. It's an interesting, yet unusual way of looking at forgiveness. In the middle of COVID, when the world was imploding, a plan was put forth to forgive student debt as a way of helping relieve the burdens of financial debts and payments for which many Americans couldn't pay and were being penalized. Targeted at a low- and middle-income Americans, for those who applied, the plan would eliminate anywhere from \$10k to \$20k of debt. It would potentially benefit up to 43 million borrowers. It would cost around \$400m over 30 years. Immediately, there was outrage and pushback. This can't be done - it can't be allowed to happen! And, why not? Reasons offered included:

- It's unfair to those who already paid off their loans
- It won't stimulate the economy
- It doesn't solve the systemic problem with high tuitions & student-loan borrowing
- The lenders will suffer

- It's political overreach

When we stop to look at all of these reasons, we see all of the reasons why forgiveness is a struggle for us.

- It's hard or difficult to do, literally. It can hurt or sting – it involves emotions. It's a relinquishing of power; if any forgiveness is going to happen, it's going to be done how I say it and when I say it and there's no room for negotiation. Who is I? (those with the power).

Forgiveness isn't about perfection – getting it perfectly right, or else it doesn't count. It's about heart. Doing it like God does, extravagantly. The student-debt relief plan went all the way to the Supreme court and was denied. The reason given? Overreach – the president and his staff were doing things that they weren't allowed to do. The plan technically **could** happen, but it would have to be approved and enacted by Congress. So, what is Congress doing?

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John Newton, author of the hymn Amazing Grace, was a long-time investor in the slave trade, owned ships and captained them as well. Oddly enough, he was also a slave himself for a brief period. In 1748 while sailing back to England, the ship encountered a severe storm and practically drowning, Newton began praying to God, crying out for mercy. The storm subsided and they reached home safely. That was Newton's conversion moment. He immediately became a Christian and it was the inspiration for Amazing Grace. Yet it was still six years before Newton stopped trading slaves. Newton used his freedom to oppress people around him. How could he do that?

We shouldn't judge him too harshly though, because we do the same things when we buy clothes made in sweatshops, when American military drones kill foreign civilians, and when our criminal justice system favors one race over another. We don't sell slaves, but we are part of systems that enslave. God's Kin-dom is not yet in our world where some who are free oppress others so that they are not free. When there is power to forgive, yet we don't. Newton at least came to see that. In 1788 he wrote a pamphlet called "thoughts upon the slave trade." he apologized for a confession which he said came too late. He wrote, "it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me but I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shutters." It had become clear to Newton that while profiting from the slave trade he had not been a Christian, not in the full sense of the word. He had glimpsed but not inhabited God's Kin-dom.

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What can God's kin-dom of now and not-yet look like in the eyes of forgiveness?

In 2014, The New York Times Magazine published a photo essay called, [Portraits of Reconciliations.](#)<sup>1</sup>

All of the portraits were taken in Rwanda, 20 years after the genocide during which nearly 1,000,000 people were killed. The pictures are unlikely, almost unthinkable tableaux. In one a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another a woman poses with a casually reclining man who looted her property and whose father helped murder her husband and children. In many of these photos there is little evident warmth between the pairs and yet they are together. In each, the perpetrator is a Hutu who was granted pardon by the Tutsi survivor of his crime. Their forgiveness was hard won. All these pairs of people had spent months in counseling overseen by a nonprofit organization working toward reconciliation. After the counseling each perpetrator made a formal request for forgiveness. When granted, as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html>

forgiveness was in these cases granted, the forgiveness was sealed and celebrated with gifts and song and dancing.

The pairs in each portrait were interviewed and to hear of the violence and pain that they'd suffered, it was clear that those feelings were still evident, yet there was also grace and the freeing power of forgiveness.

One perpetrator said, "I burned her house. I attacked her in order to kill her and her children, but God protected them, and they escaped. When I was released from jail, if I saw her I would run and hide. [Then I took part in the training.] I decided to ask her for forgiveness. To have good relationships with the person to whom you did evil deeds - we thank God." The woman he'd attacked said, "I used to hate him. When he came to my house and knelt down before me and asked forgiveness, I was moved by his sincerity. Now if I cry for help he comes to rescue me. when I face any issue, I call him."

Another survivor said, "If I am not stubborn, life moves forward. When someone comes close to you without hatred, although horrible things happened, you welcome him and grant what he is looking for from you. Forgiveness equals mercy." Her perpetrator said, "Her forgiveness proved to me that she is a person with a pure heart."

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When I hear such stories, I think to myself, "there's no way I could ever forgive like this. I can't count that high." I pray that no one is ever tested and pushed to such limits ever again, but I know that that's unlikely. But, these stories provide hope that forgiveness, **extravagant, Godly forgiveness**, is possible. I'm grateful that such forgiveness does happen. I'm grateful that with God by our side, we are capable of such mercy and grace and we can continue to get closer to making the "not-yet Kin-dom" more of the "now Kin-dom."

AMEN