



*The Freedom of Forgiveness*  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost A 9/13/20  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

A person of great wisdom once shared with Jamie and me the 16 magic words that make every marriage work: I love you. You're beautiful. Let's eat out. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Notice that nearly half of those words have to do with giving or receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness is not only central to married life; it is at the heart of the Christian life. It is central because it leads us to the freedom to be all that God has created each one of us to be; *and*, it is incredibly hard.

We sometimes hear fantastic stories about forgiveness. I think of some of the families of those murdered in Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina five years ago who forgave the killer. Or about the Amish community, fifteen or so years ago, who famously forgave the shooter who killed five Amish girls and wounded five others, before turning his gun on himself. Or about the Vietnamese woman – made famous by the photograph in *Time Magazine* from the Vietnam War—who in the 1980s forgave a soldier who participated in the bombing of her village.

These kinds of stories are amazing and inspiring, and they underscore the fact that forgiveness is a decision followed by a continuous process. But most of us face the issue of forgiveness in more ordinary circumstances: Can I forgive a member of my family, or a work colleague, or a friend, or another member of the church who has hurt me? Can I ask for forgiveness from a member of my family, or a work colleague, or a friend, or another member of the church for ways I have hurt them? Can I forgive myself, for the ways I have fallen short, including ways that I may have hurt myself?

Forgiveness may have an even more significant role in our civic and cultural life these days, days which sometimes feel like a toxic stew of bitterness and resentment that starts at the top.

Jesus was greatly concerned about forgiveness. It is central to who he was and what he taught. Jesus teaches us to ask God to forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Jesus, even as he hung on the cross, was able to say to those who had put him there, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23.34*)

In our Gospel passage this morning, we meet a God of Forgiveness. Peter, ever eager to prove himself to be the good disciple, offers Jesus what he thought to be a pretty good standard for forgiveness. “Lord, shall I forgive one who sins against me as many as seven times?” he says. Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” I’m told that the Greek here is confusing; in fact, Jesus could actually be saying “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times seven, times.” In any case, here is a poetic way of saying, “keep forgiving, always.”

The practice of forgiveness is to be a hallmark of the people who call themselves Jesus’ disciples. Indeed, literally, we are to practice forgiveness, because repetition is what it takes to become proficient.

After this exchange with Peter, Jesus tells a disturbing parable that *seems* to be at odds with his message of forgiveness. His disciples, earthy peasants and fisherfolk who know a good story, are gathered around him, ready for another whopper peopled by the kinds of characters they experience in their lives.

You recall the outline of the story. A slave (likely an educated bureaucrat) owes a king 10,000 talents. You can imagine Jesus' listeners elbowing each other with guffaws. An impossible and hilarious sum of money—a talent was about 40 pounds of gold. In current dollars, an ounce of gold is worth roughly \$2,000, which means a pound of gold is roughly \$24,000 (precious metals are measured 12oz. to a pound rather than 16oz.) If a talent is 40 pounds of gold, then a talent is worth about \$900,000; and if the debt is 10,000 talents—you do the math—it's \$9.6 trillion in current dollars. It takes a country the size of the United States to rack up a debt like that—although ours was 26 trillion in mid-August.

<https://www.thebalance.com/who-owns-the-u-s-national-debt-3306124>.

So, a slave racks up an impossible debt, and the king lets wealth due to him, beyond any human reckoning, disappear like mist. The forgiven slave then turns around and refuses to cancel the infinitesimal (by comparison) debt of 100 denarii (about 100 days wages at the time) owed to him by another servant much lower on the social pecking order. He has him thrown in jail. Word gets around about this meanness of spirit. The king summons the first slave, reinstates the debt, then hands him over to be tortured until his entire debt is to be repaid.

It's the extremes that make this story so outlandish. We can imagine the head scratching, and chortles and elbows in the ribs that his listeners are giving one another. We can also imagine that they feel the first slave got his just desserts. It doesn't feel exactly like a story about forgiveness, does it, especially if Jesus actually said the lines "And that's what God will do to you, if you don't forgive from your heart." (Some scholars believe Matthew took the liberty of adding those lines to Jesus' remembered teachings to make sure the early church "got" Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness. (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, p. 382))

We are in danger if we allegorize this story. If we assign each figure in the story a role—that is, the King is God who dispenses or retracts forgiveness; the two slaves represent individuals with wildly different needs for forgiveness; and the fellow slaves stand for the wider community that brings its judgment to bear on the individual who cannot forgive the small debt—we will miss the point.

A parable functions differently than allegory. There is a famous definition of a parable: a lit stick of dynamite covered by a story.

Clarence Jordan <https://sojo.net/articles/parables-aren-t-platitudes-they-re-sticks-dynamite>

What's being blown up here is the idea that forgiveness can be in any way monetized or reduced to a transactional proposition. The ridiculous numbers symbolize the impossibility of quantifying forgiveness, of putting a price on the freedom that God desires for us. I believe the parable blows up our



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idea of a vengeful God, highlights our role in forgiveness, and reminds us that ultimately, forgiveness flows graciously from God.

God never desires torture for us. God wants only our thriving, our health, our wholeness. And God has given us free will. We can choose not to offer or receive forgiveness. If we decide this, then we have chosen to live with a kind of torture. Refusing to ask for forgiveness for oneself, or to offer it to another, is to condemn oneself to a kind of bondage, a bondage to the past.

I'm reminded of time in my own life when I needed to both offer and ask for forgiveness. A family business had gone under. Trust was exploited. Inheritances were lost. Grudges were held. Relationships iced over. Eventually, I came to the understanding that my anger and resentment were over things that I was told I should care about but didn't, actually, care about. I realized I both needed to forgive my sister and her husband for their mistakes, but, more importantly to me, I needed ask for their forgiveness for treating them poorly. It took years—but it was a huge relief for all of us. And it breathed new life into relationships that wanted to be revived.

Forgiving is not forgetting, particularly when violence and abuse are involved. But forgiveness is refusing to let the past dictate the future.

There is a saying that holding onto resentment against someone else, or oneself, is like drinking poison, and expecting the other person to die.

God has not willed the bondage. But God will allow it, until we come to our senses. Sometimes our own pain is the only way to learn to choose a different way. It's like locking the door from the inside and leaving the key in the lock.

Jesus' admonition to forgive another person seventy-seven, or seventy-seven times seven, is a reminder that not only is forgiveness necessary for a free life, it is also that forgiveness takes practice. Episcopal priest Becca Stevens writes that Jesus gave Peter a number big enough that it would take Peter the rest of his life to achieve. That's how much Jesus wanted Peter, and us, to be free. (*Love Heals*, p. 135)

It is a process. It is not a once and for all proposition, particularly for those who have been the victims, not only devastating of cruelty and abuse, but also of the repeated minor offenses that are the stuff of daily living in community: it's never over. But if we hold onto resentment, it will drag us down.

And it all comes down to freedom. The purpose of forgiveness is freedom. From the beginning, God has wanted us to be free. Free from the bondage of sin, free from the bondage of the past, from the bondage of self. Freedom, therefore, to be in right relationship with God, ourselves and our neighbors. Freedom to give one another and to the world and one another all that we have to offer, to the glory of God, for the strengthening of God's people, for the upbuilding of God's kingdom in the fantastic world God has given us. **Amen.**