

Much! or, “How Much Forgiveness?”

Matthew 18:21-35

22nd Sunday after Trinity

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St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

I read recently that it is generally agreed among etiquette experts that Christmas trees should not appear in homes before Thanksgiving. I’m not sure if the same directive applies to Christmas references in sermons, but this morning, I am compelled to risk it. You see, I’m a rather ardent fan of Dicken’s classic, *A Christmas Carol*; not the numberless movie versions, mind you, though I enjoy many of those well enough. No, it’s Dickens’ book itself that I appreciate. Now, don’t get me wrong—Dicken’s theology is abysmal, and his sometimes “preachy” liberal moralism can be annoying, but his story-telling is superb, and his craft with the English language is captivating. One of my favorite passages comes early in the story during Scrooge’s encounter with his first ghostly visitor, Marley. Scrooge is coming to terms with the reality of his old partner’s ghost and asks him, “How now!...What do you want with me?” And the ghost who once was Jacob Marley replies, “Much!” It’s that single word that captures my attention. It’s a common, ordinary word of a scant four letters, but in context, it is ominous, mysterious, and freighted with menace. This short interchange between Scrooge and Marley kept coming back to me as I read and re-read and studied the parable that is our text this morning. This is one of the many parables of Jesus that is all too familiar to us. You’ve heard it before—countless times before. Like me, you know it well and have weighed its truth and its impact. But, this is a parable that demands and delivers a great deal—perhaps a great deal more than you might expect. What does the parable demand? Much!

Things begin brightly enough, of course. Even without a knowledge of that ancient world and its ways, you can easily picture the scene. A royal hall, a king in glory, and one of the king’s slaves dragged in to be called to account for his financial failure. Without getting too caught up in the cultural details, it’s important to remember that these slaves were typically well-educated, trusted counselors and managers of wealthy estates. They were treated with a degree of respect—in fact, they have more in common with today’s corporate employees than they do with the dehumanizing slavery of our own country’s history. But, this particular slave has run into trouble. Doing monetary conversions from the Bible to our world is a bit imprecise, but the point is clear enough: what does he owe? Much! — somewhere in the neighborhood of 3 to 12 billion dollars. So, when the unfortunate slave grovels on the ground, pleading for patience and promising to repay the debt, it’s not only awkward and humiliating, it’s patently absurd. This debt is not going to be repaid. How he could incur such a debt is beside the point, of course. But the overwhelming debt only makes the actions of the king all the more stunning. The slave begs and the king forgives. Just like that, with a word from the king, the debt is gone. Mercy mattered more than a few billion dollars.

The king’s actions are incredible, and actually call into question our own human capacity to forgive. Can any person match this sort of forgiving? Three hundred years ago, the poet, Alexander Pope famously wrote, “To err is human, to forgive divine.” Perhaps he’s right—maybe giving forgiveness is actually a superhuman action—beyond the capacity of normal human behavior. But we do try. In fact, under the influence of Christian teaching, our American culture has cultivated a keen appreciation for the practice of forgiveness—under certain conditions. And in the church, I see most Christians working diligently to live and give forgiveness; even in horrible and often heartbreaking circumstances, Christians strive to practice the wonderful art of forgiveness. But, it’s hard. And I wonder if we’re really getting it right.

Forgiveness is supposed to be heartfelt, absolute, and complete. When it comes to giving forgiveness, what does God expect of you? Much! —seventy times seven, and from the heart.

So, how are you doing? When you forgive your spouse for yet another thoughtless word or selfish action, do you also make another tally on the relationship-score-card and then at convenient moments remind your spouse of the score? When you forgive your co-worker for stealing the credit for your work, do you yet harbor a twinge of resentment and feel a surge of delight when he is later disciplined for another offense? Do you extend the art of forgiveness also to yourself and acknowledge your own sin and God's grace, or do you foolishly cling to a perverted sense of self-importance by declaring that for whatever thing you have done, you'll *never* forgive yourself? And when the car that almost runs you onto the shoulder as it blows past is itself later on the shoulder lit up from behind with flashing blue and red lights, does your heart ache with sympathy...or soar with satisfaction? Forgiveness is hard. The forgiveness that God expects from us means no sin is too big; no time is needed to "get to the point of forgiveness;" no scores are kept, ever; no resentment is kept simmering; no latent justice is sought or celebrated; no limits are observed, and no conditions are put in place. Forgiveness is hard. Maybe it is truly divine—something only God can do.

Or, maybe it's not even possible for God to do it. At least the king in the parable couldn't do it. The extraordinary, stunning forgiveness given to the indebted slave is not the point of Jesus' parable, is it? Jesus doesn't tell the story to highlight God's amazing grace—no, he has another much less pleasant lesson to teach. The forgiven slave is the focus; but there's something wrong with him. He can be forgiven a debt of billions of dollars, but he can't grant even a sliver of patience or grace to a fellow slave who owes him about \$8,000. In fact, he attacks him, chokes him, and throws him into prison, rejecting the exact same plea for mercy that had just been on his own lips. What kind of person would do such a thing? Did the incredible grace he had just received make no impact at all? It's abnormal. It's scandalous. Our justice meters sound the alert...and we are not alone. This strange slave's fellow slaves are also justly scandalized and make a full report to the king. And the size of this injustice is so great that we don't even think to consider them as mere talebearers. And neither does the king correct them for their gossip; no, he shares the mutual outrage. Something's wrong, here. The unmerciful slave is wrong. He has exploited and trampled grace. And so, there is another hearing before the king, and this time there is no mercy and no grace. How can there be!?! This time, there is only condemnation. Something *is* wrong with this unforgiving slave—he is wicked. He deserves punishment. He deserves torture. And he gets it. And you are relieved and secretly, if not outwardly, delighted. The villain gets what he deserves. Justice wins.

And grace? Well, grace is gone. It got beat out by justice. There *are* limits to grace, after all, aren't there? I mean you can't just get forgiveness and then not give forgiveness, can you? This wicked slave deserves what he gets, doesn't he? But, I wonder...what happened to his wife and his kids after he was handed over to the torturers? I wonder...did he plead for mercy this time, too? I wonder...was the king who had readily forgiven a debt of a few billion dollars, unable to forgive a hard heart? I wonder...is forgiveness actually conditional, after all? Does grace depend on the state of a person's heart? Does a hard heart cancel grace? And if that's the case, just how hard does a heart have to be before it blocks grace? How sincere must my forgiveness be for me to receive and keep God's forgiveness? Well, no, maybe you don't throttle those who owe you money and throw them into prison; and maybe you don't plot and scheme to find a way to take revenge on those who do you wrong; and maybe you don't angrily declare that you'll never forgive the one who sins against you...but do you really, fully forgive those who hurt you without keeping score, without resentment, without secretly exulting when they suffer some setback? Do you willingly, from your heart, sacrifice what is rightly yours so that someone else may

prosper? The wicked slave got what he deserved—but who, exactly, *is* the wicked slave? “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” *That’s* the point of the parable.

What does forgiveness demand of you? Much! It’s a terrible, unflinching demand and it damns us all. Maybe our delight at the wicked slave’s condemnation was a bit premature. Perhaps we were a little too eager to celebrate the assertion of justice. Are you ready to stand before God with his justice as the standard? Are you ready to risk his wrath with the sincerity of your heart? Is your forgiving good enough to meet his expectation? No one can endure that trial. Justice, the justice that you crave, kills you and condemns you. A word of grace is the only hope. Indeed, we are all desperate for a word of grace. But, where are we going to find that? Jesus has made his point and the parable is finished. The wicked slave is in the hands of the torturers until every penny is repaid—and that’s not going to happen. And you’ve all been put on notice that the same will happen to you if you don’t forgive from your heart. Justice has the last word, grace is gone, and, that’s terrifying.

And yet, grace is here—even in this parable it is here...and in the most unlikely place. “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.” Remarkably, the Greek verb translated, “handed over” appears in identical form, and in a strikingly similar context, nine chapters later in Matthew’s gospel: “Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified.” In the parable, the lord condemns the wicked slave. In the Praetorium, Pilate condemns the Son. But, Pilate is not the Lord of this trial. It is God’s plan and God’s action that is at work. The lord of the parable hands over the slave to the torturers until the full debt is paid. The LORD of the universe hands over the Son to the torturers until the entire debt is paid. The slave of the lord, the servant of the Lord, is the Son. And God’s wrath falls fully on him. But, the debt that condemns him is not his own. No, it is the debt of all mankind. It’s my sin. It’s your sin. It’s the keeping score, it’s the grudging forgiveness, it’s the hard heart and the secret cheering over an adversary’s misery. It is that enormous, incalculable debt you and I have racked up, that’s what he shoulders. And for that debt he is handed over. And he pays it—every bit of it. With his perfect life, and his pure, sacrificial death he pays it all completely and perfectly. And the LORD, the eternal Father who loves his Son, vindicates and glorifies his faithful and obedient Son and raises him from the dead—alive again forever. Justice is done. Grace is established. Grace is here. Grace is yours.

The remarkable grace of God won and proved by Christ is that he forgives even your failure to forgive. He can do what the king could not do. His grace is *not* limited by your performance. Your faltering, hesitant, reluctant forgiveness is forgiven by your Lord. Of course, you work hard to practice the art of forgiveness—that’s what it means to follow Christ. You strive with all that you’ve got to do it the way that your Father wants you to do it, and you keep on striving. But, your level of sincerity, effort, or progress in the art of forgiveness is irrelevant. In Christ, the Father *is* able to forgive it all. You are forgiven because the Son has already paid the entire debt. You have grace because the Son gives it. And what does the Son give you; and what does he have planned for you? Much! Amen.

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