

**Sunday, September 14**

**Matthew 18:21-35 (The Message)**

**A Story About Forgiveness**

21At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"

22Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

23-25"The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

26-27"The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

28"The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!'

29-31"The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

32-35"The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?' The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy."

*Forgiveness*

His brow sweating, his hands trembling with rage, his mind racing as fury filled his body. Before him were slaves, speaking rapidly about what they had just seen. The slaves were each gesturing wildly, trying to communicate to the king what they witnessed. The king couldn't, didn't want to believe what he was hearing. How could he do such a thing? After what he had just been given? His anger spilled over as he barked to the slaves to go and find the one to whom they were referring. He breathed deeply as he tried to

gather his thoughts, focusing his mind upon this servant, this one who owed him everything, the one who had begged for mercy and received it, then gone and acted stupidly, vainly, forgetting all that had been done for him. The king's eyes narrowed as this one was brought before him, and before he realized what he was saying he lashed out at this weak and greedy servant who had revealed his true colors to his fellow slaves.

How did we get to this point? The king had every reason to be angry. He had just released a slave from a debt that would have crippled him for life. The future of his family and every earthly possession rested in the hands of the king, and it was only his plea for mercy that saved him from being sold. The king was moved to act with pity, and that pity had granted new life, a new hope for the future. How did the slave react?

By spitting on the gift that had been given him. The king showed himself to be a man of graciousness, a man willing to be generous to another in need. The king was willing to forgive a massive debt in order to spare this man and his family from a tragic fate. Then the slave showed his true personality. He went forward and met a man who owed him a pittance, a day's wage as compared to the lifetime of labor which had just been forgiven. He treated this man like a scrap from the family table, having him thrown into the very prison the slave deserved to be inside. He showed his ingratitude, his selfishness, his callousness and meanness in a single day, acting as though he had never received any gift and deserved to be treated with respect he had never earned.

Two men of different ranks and yet each were owed a debt. Through their actions they revealed the character within. And so I ask—how do we demonstrate who we truly are? What are the actions we take to show our true colors?

This world is a busy place. It can be difficult to separate one from another, or to separate ourselves from the masses. We are each different, and yet we are all alike, even similar to the animal kingdom. A recent *National Geographic* detailed how Chimpanzees laugh, and they get upset if someone laughs at them. They spit, and they consider the act of spitting to be an extreme expression of disgust. They kiss, shake hands, care for kittens and pick their scabs. A human being shares about 98% of its genetic sequencing with a chimpanzee. What difference does that 2% make? Of course, these percentages are not the best way to determine differences. Humans share more than 80% of their sequencing with mice, and about 40% of their sequencing with a head of lettuce. Just think—if a little over half of your DNA was different, you might be an appetizer or a garnish instead of a human being. Perhaps we are not as separated as we might like. But if many of our behaviors do not even separate us from the animal kingdom, let alone our fellow humans, what are the actions we do undertake that make us distinct?

As a species Human beings have made huge leaps that others have not. We have learned how to control and manipulate the natural world, from the power of the mighty rivers down to splitting the atom. We have created machines that can keep a man alive and others that can kill thousands in an instant. We have learned how to move resources quickly to alleviate the suffering of another around the world, and we have become so self-absorbed that we have failed to do so. We are capable of great acts of love and atrocious acts of cruelty.

Within our species there exist countless categories of people. They begin at the basic and can be narrowed down to define a person by their personality type or their predisposition to certain diseases. We divide people up into conservative or liberal, Southern or Yankee, Volunteer fan or...well, around here it's best to just lay low when they're making that division.

Each of us has come here today because of another category, another label that defines us. ‘Christian.’ We have professed faith in, or have a curiosity about, the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has gathered us here today and we are aching to hear what the Spirit has to say, how it will guide us to speak and act. The question to us is: When we walk out the door, having heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, meeting the world as we leave, how do we act?

The servant in this story had just received a marvelous gift. A gift beyond words, beyond imagination. The sum of money is probably too great to fathom. The NRSV Study Bible has a talent defined as being worth more than 15 years labor. How one even begins to accumulate a debt of 10000 talents is probably an interesting tale. This debt was swept away with a word, with an act, with a gesture of love and compassion. The king gave this slave a gift that the slave could have never earned, never repaid.

We are in the same shoes. Our sins are a debt too great for us to pay. Each has their own sins, and we each have our collective sins. During every worship service in this sanctuary we say a prayer of common confession. Often we may wonder why as we confess sins that we have not committed. We may wonder why we linger upon these words of sin when there are so many words of grace we could be speaking. The prayer of confession is a Biblical practice, one in which, in the words of John Witvliet, “we model honest faith and enact honest, covenantal communication between us and God. We bear witness to the fact that our God longs for honesty within the relationship God has established in Christ.” We lay all of our humanity, our own selves and each other’s burdens, before God, trusting in God’s grace to bear sins too heavy for us to carry. In confessing our sins, we acknowledge our own weakness and God’s greatness, for God’s ability to forgive is greater than our ability to sin.

In confessing our sins, we throw ourselves upon the mercy of God, crying out for forgiveness, crying out for mercy, begging to have the chance to repay our debt. We cry as we think of our children, of our

families, being lost because of our recklessness and greed. We weep at the feet of the throne of God for the chances squandered.

And in response God lifts our heads, and without a word points to the cross. Each sin was driven into the cross by a hammer that broke a thousand hearts with each stroke. Every sin was made clean by the blood that streamed from wounds of the Savior pinned there by the nails. Each soul was created anew by the dying gasps of the man from Galilee.

As we leave worship, having confessed our own sins and having heard the Good news that our sins are forgiven, we will meet the world on our way out, what will we show? Will it be greed, and will we throttle the world for each penny until we get what we feel we deserve? Or will we go out as a people covered in grace, pouring forth love, pouring forth mercy, and giving each individual and the world at large a chance to see the Risen Christ through our words and our actions? Will we distinguish ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ through out lives? Or will we forget all that has been washed clean and go forth as though we are our own lords?

As we go forth and meet the world, what will we show? What will we say? What can we forgive? What can we offer? Whom can we love?

Let us pray.