

Extravagant Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35
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So, the first thing I did when I began preparations for this sermon was check the lectionary. I wanted to find out what Christians around the world would be using as their common text today. What other preachers would be preaching from. What other parishioners would be listening to.

I didn't like what I found.

That doesn't sound right, does it? Didn't like what I found. It's the Bible, dadgumit. You oughta like everything you find in there. Who are you to be saying you don't like what you find written in the Bible?

I was talking to me, not to you, mind you.

I was annoyed with myself. So, I took a deep breath, cleared my throat, and re-gathered my Christian composure. Re-read Matthew 18:21-35. I still didn't like it. So, I decided, I'm not preaching on Matthew this morning. I'll preach on the other New Testament text. So, I went to Paul's letter to the Romans. 14:1-12. I liked that even less. At least Jesus told a parable. I like stories. Even if I don't like how they end, I like a good story. Jesus tells a good story. Paul just tells you what he thinks.

I didn't like what Paul was thinking. And I sure enough didn't like how Jesus' story ends.

Both scripture texts felt like trick questions.

I still regret the day years ago when I was teaching an introductory class on the New Testament with a colleague and we came up with the idea to insert a couple of trick questions. We were concerned that the students weren't reading the New Testament. Can you imagine, taking an introduction to the New Testament course, and not reading the actual New Testament? They were reading the secondary materials, because they thought they were going to

be tested on that. But they weren't reading the Bible. They were reading what people were writing about the New Testament, but they weren't reading the New Testament itself.

So, we had these questions where we would put in a quote from the New Testament and the students would have to tell us what book or letter of the New Testament the quote came from. That would let us know they were reading it. Questions like:

Jesus Wept. Shall I ask you where that text comes from? The Gospel of John, right?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew, right? Sermon on the Mount.

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Parable of the Lost Sheep. Luke, right?

Cleanliness is next to Godliness. Come on, I've answered the other ones. This is easy. You tell me. Which New Testament text is this one from? It's so familiar. It's right there on the tip of your awareness. Some students said Romans. Some said Galatians. Some said the letter to James. John Wesley preached it in a sermon in 1778. But not because it came from the Bible. He got it from somewhere else. The question is a trick because it sounds biblical, Christian folk use it all the time, but it's not in the Bible. It just sounds like it ought to be in the Bible.

Let's put it this way, the students were not amused.

Neither was I. After I read these two texts. They're the opposite of my trick question. They actually ARE in the Bible. But it kinda feels, a lot of the time, like they ought not to be.

I grew up with two brothers. Even though I love my brothers desperately, there would be times when we were growing up that one of them would do something that would make me so mad. And, then, my mom and dad would make me even madder. They would spout this Christian nonsense about making up and making right. Forgiveness. Bah. Humbug.

Mature, grown up Christians like my mom and dad preached forgiveness. Immature, growing up Christians like me prophesied righteous indignation. Mature, grown up Christians like my mom and dad preached reconciliation. Immature, growing up Christians like me prophesied eternal judgment. Yes, there were those days I wanted God to judge one of my brothers. Judgment day. That's in the Bible, right?

Peter asks Jesus the question I often wanted to ask my mom and dad. Well, how many times should I forgive those sinner brothers of mine? Commentator Tom Long says it well, "Peter wants to know the statue of limitations on sin."^[1] So did I. Jesus didn't mean forgiveness to be limitless. Did he?

But here's Jesus responding to Peter's question with what almost seems like a trick answer. How many times should I forgive a member of the church who does me wrong?

You've heard that saying. Do it to me once, shame on you. Do it to me twice, shame on me. In the real world, yet get to get forgiveness maybe once. Only a fool would forgive someone more than that.

But **Jesus**. Dadgumit, Jesus!

What does Jesus say?

I'm not sure Jesus is listening. A. Member. Of. The. Church.

Somebody who ought to know better. We're all Christians in here. We're all brothers and sisters in here. We know the rules. We know what God expects. We read the Bible, right? We ought to know how to treat one another. And yet, the plain truth is that Christians can be incredibly mean to other Christians. Church members can evangelically eviscerate other church members. I don't need to argue with you. I shouldn't have to convince you. Chances are you've witnessed it. Chances are you've been victimized by it. Chances are you've even perpetrated it. You've seen how wounded a person can be when a church member hurts them. You've seen how devastated an entire congregation can become when such hurt ripples

^[1]Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 211.

out into the larger church family. How many times should a member forgive another member of this kind of thing?

First, Jesus offers up a *trick* answer. In the text before this one, verses 15-20, Jesus declares that if a church member sins against you, you do the orderly thing. You tell the person he has wronged you. Then, if he responds contritely, you let it go. But if not, you bring the church into it, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, then you treat him like a Gentile and a tax collector. Aha! That's what I'm talking about! In Jesus' time and community, we hate tax collectors and we certainly do not consort with Gentiles. If we treat that sinful church member like a Gentile and a tax collector that means we judge him unworthy to be part of our community. We excommunicate him. That's day of judgment stuff. This isn't confusing at all until we stop and think, treat him like a tax collector and a Gentile, treat him like a tax collector and a Gentile. How DID *Jesus* treat tax collectors and Gentiles? He ate with tax collectors (Matt. 9:10-11). He consorted with and showed mercy to Gentiles (Matt. 8:5-13; 15:21-28). Jesus didn't kick them out; Jesus drew them in. Close! If we're going to treat people who hurt us the way Jesus treats tax collectors and Gentiles, that kind of means we're going to reel them in, not push them away. Dadgumit, Jesus. That's a trick answer.

Next thing you know, he offers up a *crazy* answer. How many times should we forgive a church member who hurts us? The NRSV translates what Jesus says as 77 times! But the Greek is confusing. It could just as easily translate seventy times seven. The exact number, though, is not the point. The point is that you should just keep forgiving. And forgiving. And forgiving. And forgiving. Always!

According to Tom Long, "the whole process is focused on the restoration of the offender, not revenge for the offended."^[2] That's the key to forgiveness. Restoration of the offender. But, sometimes, because the offender has been so offending, the whole notion of restoring him just feels offensive.

^[2]Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 210.

After all, doesn't forgiveness reward bad behavior?

My daughter was raising a German Shepherd puppy this past Spring. German Shepherds get to be pretty big dogs. And they can look and sound pretty ferocious. Especially if they're not properly socialized. And since they were bred to be working dogs, you have to work in play as if the play is work and you have to try to do it in ways that get her to be familiar around people and other dogs. So, she talked to her vet, to the breeder, to a trainer and they were all helping her socialize her German Shepherd puppy. She used treats to reward the behavior that she wanted to encourage, and she used lack of treats and her own behavior to discourage behavior she wanted to stop. No one wants a 40 pound German Shepherd puppy jumping up on them, even if it's because the puppy is delighted to see you. So, when the puppy jumped up on her, she would turn around and walk away. She'd come back and if the puppy sat as she instructed, she gave her a treat and pat, and if the puppy jumped up again, she turned her back and walked away again. The puppy learned pretty quickly that it would be rewarded for containing its joy at seeing her. Impulse control, she called it. The vet told her to use treats liberally, that she was in essence, for the time the puppy was in training, a human pez dispenser. Reward, reward, reward the behavior you wanted to see more of.

Can you imagine if she would have given her German Shepherd puppy treats for jumping up on her? That would have encouraged exactly the wrong behavior.

Well, isn't that kind of what forgiveness does, Jesus? After all, Christians are the German Shepherds of the faith world, aren't they? Incredibly smart. Will work until they drop. Fiercely loyal. They bark at sin. They howl at wrongdoing. Loud of voice and larger than life. And their bite is definitely worse than their bark. Any church member who has been bitten by another church member can attest to that. So, why would you give them something good, forgiveness, for doing something bad?

What you want to give them is what they deserve? Anger.

There are these popular sayings, like, anger corrodes the vessel that contains it. So, instead of holding in anger or hate, forgive, let it go. That sounds reasonable and rational. But

no one who is angry, particularly in a situation where they *ought* to be angry, is necessarily reasonable and rational. Plus, we might as well say it, anger is to a wrong what scratching is to an itch. It's almost reflexive. At least it starts out reflexive. Then it's something else. My great grandmother used to watch you scratch an itch for a second or two, and then you got on her nerves. She'd tell you, you stopped scratching because of an itch long ago. Now you're just scratching because you like it. I think anger works like that, too. Particularly the righteous indignation kind of anger. I've seen people rightfully upset. Speak up. Speak out. Rightfully so. And then, just refuse to let it go. Gone from scratching the itch to enjoying the feel. Psychology Today had an article back in 2018 that recognized this phenomenon. The title of the article was: "Why You Secretly Enjoy Getting Angry."^[3] There are a lot of angry people out there in our city, our country, our world. And you can't convince me that they don't enjoy the anger that they're feeling. Perhaps something happened to them long ago. Perhaps to someone they loved. Perhaps they just think something happened. Perhaps it happened to somebody they read about in the newspaper. Perhaps they just made it up. But they're angry. They're mad. And they can't let go because it's become part of them. Anger is like that. It gets in you. It becomes you.

Forgiveness is NOT like that. Forgiveness is foreign. You have an itch. The natural response is to scratch. During this pandemic most of us know how normal it is to scratch an itch, particularly when it is on our face. We don't want to touch our faces, but many's the time when by the time we remember not to touch our face, we're already touching our face. An itch. A natural response. A scratch. Anger is normal. Someone says something inappropriate. Someone does something inappropriate. On the highway. In the classroom. In the boardroom. In the church. We respond naturally. Not with forgiveness. Forgiveness is a learned reaction. A thoughtful response.

^[3]Leon Seltzer, Ph.D., "Why You Secretly Enjoy Getting Angry," *Psychology Today*, November 8, 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201811/why-you-secretly-enjoy-getting-angry>.

Forgiveness has to be trained. Like the way you train your muscles to move in a way they ordinarily would not. To hit a baseball. To shoot a basketball. To throw a football. To run a long distance race. To lift a heavy barbell. To throw a roundhouse kick. You have to practice it over and over so that it becomes a kind of muscle memory. So that you respond with the forgiveness move you've practiced instead of what feels more natural, anger, righteous indignation. Forgiveness takes a lot of practice. And a lot of desire. You have to want a thing to want to practice a thing to get that thing. I want a six pack of abs. But I don't want to do all the core exercise necessary to get it. So, I settle for a half pack. Question is, how much do you want to forgive? It takes practice to be able to build the muscle for forgiveness. It takes a lot of practice, a lot of repetition, so in a quick hitting situation, you respond naturally not with anger, but with forgiveness instead.

But why would you want to express forgiveness when anger feels so right, so appropriate? This forgiveness stuff just doesn't make any sense. Until I'm the one in need of forgiveness. Then, it makes all the sense in the world. Especially if God is the one I've wronged. I don't want God angry. At least not at me. There might be times when I want God to be angry with YOU! But I always want God to be forgiving with ME. Even if *I* have been justifiably angry with others.

And THAT is why Jesus tells this absolutely outrageous story. He ties God's forgiveness of us to our forgiveness of others.

Dadgumit, Jesus!

The first thing the story does is broaden the range. It's not just about church members forgiving church members now. It's about kings and subjects; it's about all people everywhere. Forgiveness is not just a church thing. It is a universal thing.

Given the history of the European and American slave trade, the language of enslavement here is painful. Jesus tells the story this way because slavery was prevalent in his world. And yet, as you can tell, slavery in the Greco-Roman world, though despicable, was different from European and American chattel slavery. Greco-Roman enslavement was for the most part not

racially based, but conquest based. Conquerors often enslaved those whom they conquered. The conquerors also recognized that many of the persons they enslaved were highly skilled, highly intelligent, or both. Conquerors therefore often employed those whom they enslaved as leaders in their business or personal affairs. Roman emperors were known to deploy enslaved persons as some of their most skilled counselors. It appears that this king in the parable did the same with those whom he had enslaved. They clearly worked for him. He clearly entrusted to them almost limitless financial discretion over his resources.

Which is where the problem comes in. One of the persons whom the king has enslaved has scandalously diminished the king's treasury to the point where he now owes the king ten thousand talents. How much is a talent? Well, a denarius is worth a day's pay. A talent was worth somewhere between six and ten thousand denarii. Ten thousand talents is an outlandish amount of money. We would think of billions of dollars. There is absolutely no way the man enslaved by the king could ever pay back that much money. How in the world he managed to lose that much money is certainly a mystery. But it is crystal clear he would never manage to pay it back. As Tom Long writes, an Egyptian pharaoh wouldn't be able to pay that debt back.

The king rightly scratches this itch with anger. He is furious. He is out a fortune that he can't get back. So, he decides to sell the man whom he has enslaved and his entire family. The enslaved man and his family aren't worth ten thousand talents. So, he's not selling them to get his money back. He's selling them to punish them. Because he is angry. And rightfully so.

And this is where the parable gets really loopy. The enslaved man falls to his knees and promises to pay back every penny of the debt. We already know that it is impossible for him to pay back such a debt. It can't be done. The enslaved man knows it. The king who enslaved him knows it. The situation is laugh out loud ridiculous.

And this is when Tom Long says: "The king must have been amused as well, because he responded to this ridiculous request with an even more preposterous response: He forgave the

debt—every last penny of it—and set the slave free. No threats, no recriminations, nothing—just extravagant forgiveness, pure and free.”^[4]

Extravagant forgiveness. Limitless forgiveness. How much should I forgive, Jesus? Not 77 times worth. Ten thousand talents worth. A billion dollars worth.

You know that Jesus is doing, don't you? He is suggesting that what the king does with this man he has enslaved, God does with us. Jesus is implying that there is humor in salvation. There is a ridiculousness to salvation. We keep bartering with God about doing better when there is no way we could ever repair the ruptures we have created with God, there is no way we can justify the wrongs we have committed, the debts we have amassed in our living. And we have the nerve to get angry with someone who does whatever they do to us when we owe God as much as we owe God? Jesus' story means to tell us that the whole enterprise is outrageous.

Because Jesus means for us to understand that WE are the enslaved man in this story. We are the ones who have been issued, every day we live, every morning we rise up, every evening we lie down, we have been issued extravagant forgiveness. We Reformed folk call it grace. And what do we do with it?

You can't like what Jesus is implying with this story any more than I like it. You know what happens. This comedy all of a sudden turns dark. The enslaved man runs into another enslaved man who owes him a measly 100 denarii. When that person begs him for mercy the way he had pleaded for mercy from the king, he ruthlessly rejects the plea, responds reasonably with anger, and punishes him by throwing him into debtor's prison. Listen to Tom Long again: “You can imagine the reaction Jesus' parable provoked at this point. Anyone who heard this story was surely enraged at the massive ingratitude of the first slave.”^[5]

^[4]Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 211–12.

^[5]Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 212.

And that is when Jesus turns their rage back onto themselves. This story, he says, is about you. “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

Jesus!

I’d like to think, as broken as I am that my sins are not comparable to some of the sins people have sinned against me or others. Because my schedule often gets out of control during the school year, I write many of my sermons during the summer. The morning I finalized the draft for this sermon, protests had erupted in Minneapolis, Minnesota and in other cities across the country because of the killing of George Floyd, the African American man who died, pleading for breath, declaring pain throughout his body, calling pitifully for his mama, as bystanders pleaded with the police officer who had handcuffed him, to take his knee and the full weight of his body off of Mr. Floyd’s neck. I wondered about forgiveness as I trembled in fury over George Floyd’s death and my withering inability to do anything about it. Death is the itch I feel. Righteous anger is the scratch with which I want to respond. Forgiveness feels foreign to me.

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

On June 17, 2015, a young white man filled with racial hatred entered the Bethel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina and took the lives of nine African American Christians as they worshipped the Jesus who told this parable. On June 19, 2015, just two days later, I read these stunning words that described one of the key reactions of the families of those Charleston 9. “They forgave him.”

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

There is much to ask Jesus about his teaching here. There is much more to forgiveness to be sure. But I think the key point from this particular Jesus teaching is that, for Jesus, forgiveness is not about someone else, it is about us. It is not about allowing people to keep

hurting us or keep doing the wrongs that they do. You will remember that the king in the story responded quickly and ruthlessly when his forgiveness was mocked. The person who forgives expects repentance and recognition and what follows, change. Otherwise, the forgiveness is mocked. But with this parable, Jesus wasn't focused on what happens to the person who is forgiven; he was focused on the people whom he calls to forgive. Us.

That is why he tells this parable. Or as Tom Long concludes: “When one gets a sense of proportion, then, a sense of the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God’s mercy, no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose.”^[6] So, . . . Fire away. The very next chance you get.

—*Brian K. Blount* © 2020

^[6]Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 213.