

FORCED FORGIVENESS? Matthew 18:21-35

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“It’s not fair!” Walk into a preschool classroom during a time when children are playing freely, or talk to the parent of a three-year-old, and you’ll realize it doesn’t take children long to learn that phrase: “It’s not fair.” They don’t know the word “justice” or the concept, of course. What children have, though, is a gut-level feeling that they want the world to be different, in a way that benefits them. In an effort to help their children grow, and to keep the peace, parents usually respond in two ways. Sometimes parents will say, “Life isn’t fair, honey.” And sometimes parents will bend over backwards trying to make things look more fair, counting and recounting Christmas presents so that each child has the same amount of gifts to open, of approximately the same value.

Since it occurs so early in life, it must be something innate within us: that desire for fairness, for getting what we think is rightfully ours, that impulse to defend our own self-interests.

As we grow and mature, do we still complain about unfairness, or do we instead learn to value other qualities? We see both impulses in our scripture passage for this morning.

If all you knew of Jesus was what you learned by reading the 18th chapter of Matthew, you’d be doing alright. Here’s the Jesus we know from this chapter. First he throws a little child up in the air, and says, “Here is a child of God. Become just as humble, as child-like, as this little person, and you’ll be living in heaven.”

Then he says, “I’ll tell you how much God loves every one of us. It’s like the love of a shepherd, who would leave behind 99 sheep to go search out the one who’s lost.”

Finally, Jesus teaches this: “If you’re having an argument with someone in the church community, work it out with that person, face to face. Try that first. Restore relationships among yourselves.”

What Jesus is teaching are alternatives. You think the only way to be loved by God is to prove your worthiness? That’s not how God works. Here’s an alternative. Be as humble as a child. God loves children, just for being themselves.

Do you think the only way to live is by the numbers? Do you make all your decisions that way? There’s an alternative. Sometimes one is more important than 99, especially if that one is lost.

And if you’re having a dispute with someone, don’t try to prove that you’re in the right. Here’s a better alternative: just try to restore your relationship.

Peter’s been listening to all of this, and he knows that Jesus wants people to learn forgiveness. The general, accepted rule of conduct at that time was that you should forgive someone three times. Peter thinks to himself, “hmmm...I’ll bet Jesus will say something more than 3. I’ll guess seven. I hope I’m right!” He raises his hand, “Jesus, how many times should we forgive each other? Seven times??” Jesus looks at him thinking to himself, “You really haven’t been listening at all, have you, Peter? It’s not about math. It’s about a completely alternative way of being in the world.” “Dear Peter,” he says out loud, “try seventy times seven times.” Which isn’t meant to be a

mathematical answer at all, but a way of saying, “Stop counting. Just embrace and embody the spirit of forgiveness. That’s how it works in God’s world.”

And then he tells a story. A boss loans money to one of his employees. How much? Here the math IS important. 10,000 talents. That’s enough to pay fifteen years’ of wages for 10,000 workers. In today’s US dollars, 10,000 people making minimum wage for 15 years would be 2.1 billion dollars. So, imagine a boss loaning an employee 2.1 billion. At this point Jesus has his audience in the palm of his hand. They all know that he’s not telling them a factual story. He’s telling a story that’s about something else. These outrageous numbers have their attention. Guess what? The employee can’t pay the boss back! The boss is ready to throw the man in jail, but the man begs, “Please, be patient with me.” And you know what? The begging works. The boss, knowing the man could never repay such a debt, forgives it all. “Wow!” The listeners say to themselves. That’s quite a story.

But Jesus isn’t finished. He continues. And that same man, who has just had 2.1 billion forgiven, on his way home that night, runs into a buddy of his who owes him \$50.00. He grabs the guy by the throat and demands his money. “I don’t have it now; I’ll get it to you.” But no leeway is given, no patience is shown, no grace is displayed. Instead, the forgiven man throws his buddy in jail.

Jesus’ audience gasps.

Jesus continues. The people who saw this reported it all to the boss. The boss was furious. “After I forgave you our enormous debt, you go out and demand payment from someone else?” He was so angry that this time he does punish his employee, for

good. And so, Jesus concludes, “Forgive your brothers and sisters, from your heart, even as you have been forgiven.”

Friends, you and I have been forgiven. It is no less astonishing news now than it was in Jesus’ time. This is the kind of God revealed to us in scriptures. A God who simply does not keep score of our mistakes. A God who forgives them even before we ask. We may not always feel forgiven. We may not always think we deserve to be forgiven. But it’s already happened. We have been forgiven. And we are constantly in the process of being forgiven again. This parable tells us that our ability to forgive others is connected to our awareness that we have been forgiven. It’s like we pray every Sunday, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” It’s not math or science. It’s not that one logically follows the other. It’s that the two are tied together. We forgive as we are forgiven. The more we realize we’ve been forgiven, the better able we are to forgive.

Of all of the issues that people bring to me, as a pastor, one of the most common problems is difficulty with forgiveness. Even though it makes us unhappy, we cling to old hurts as if they were prized possessions that we would miss if we let go of them. We carry around resentment the way a student on the first day of school carries an overstuffed backpack. Even though it weighs us down, we won’t let go of it.

Why is it so hard for us to forgive?

What I am talking about this morning is forgiveness that occurs within our personal lives. I’m not talking about forgiving terrorists or murderers or abusers. I’m not talking big-picture forgiveness; that’s a topic for another day. Justice needs to be

addressed before forgiveness is addressed. As long as injustice persists, it demands our attention.

For today, let's talk about the backpacks we ourselves are carrying around, the ones weighed down with small and large resentments, small and large grudges. It is easy to become a person whose life is defined by the hurts that have been done to us. Do you know someone like this? If you saw someone whose neck was permanently bent because they never took off the backpack, you'd wonder why they'd chosen to live that way. There are people whose identity becomes shaped by their wounds. Instead of letting the wounds heal, they have made them into identifying marks.

There is a timeline for forgiveness. It's different for each of us, just as grief has its own time. Certainly forgiveness shouldn't be rushed. I once worked at a rape crisis center in Texas. Women came to us for counseling, talking about their experiences of being doubly hurt. First they were hurt by the person who physically assaulted them. Then, these good church-going women went to their pastors for help, and they were told, "Honey, the first thing to do is forgive." It smacked of insensitivity. These women felt their experiences were being minimized. Forgiveness can't be rushed. But you can hold on to hurts too long. And sometimes a hurt becomes an excuse for living your own life fully. You see yourself as a victim or a martyr, someone who just can't go on living because of what someone else has done to you. That's a tragedy in itself. That's letting someone else have way too much power over you.

Max Lucado once wrote, "Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free, and realising you were the prisoner."

One of my favorite films last year was “Philomena”, starring Judi Dench. It’s based on the true story of Philomena Lee, an Irish woman who found herself pregnant as a teenager. Her son, Anthony, was taken from her at the age of three by the nuns with whom Philomena had sought refuge.

The story opens on Anthony’s 50th birthday, when Philomena tells her daughter about the half-brother she never knew she had. Philomena has looked for him several times over the years and has never stopped thinking about him, but now feels the need to share her secret for the first time.

She finds a journalist, Martin Sixsmith, who agrees to use his connections and investigative skills to help her track down her son, and uncover the truth of what happened to him.

One of the nuns in particular, Sister Hildegard, serves to bookend the story. She admits the pregnant teenager to the convent in 1952, keeps a stern eye on her while she works off the penance they impose for her sin, and appears again at the end of the story, elderly and frail, as the sole surviving nun who knew both Philomena and Anthony.

Martin suspects that Sister Hildegard knows far more than she has ever let on about Anthony’s whereabouts and, at the film’s climax, bursts into her room to confront her.

The nun is unmoved. Yes, she caused ongoing pain to a mother and child – and hundreds more like them – over decades, but she saw that as just retribution for the mother’s sin of unchastity.

Martin is furious. He wants Hildegard to feel a sense of shame and regret, to experience some tiny portion of the pain she caused in return, but Philomena stops him.

Quietly, simply, she says to Sister Hildegard, "I forgive you."

There's a stunned silence.

"What, just like that?" Sixsmith demands, outraged.

"It's not 'just like that'," Philomena says, "That was hard for me." But, she says she doesn't want to be like Martin, who was consumed with anger all the time, "It must be exhausting."

Philomena knows that harbouring anger against Sister Hildegard and the other nuns won't solve anything: it won't turn back the clock, it won't put the wrongs right, and it won't cause any pain whatsoever to the elderly nun who she will never see again. All it will do is cause her, Philomena, to live a life consumed by the bitter poison of resentment and regret.

The only way for Philomena to rise above the pain and move on in her life is to grant the gift of forgiveness, even to someone so undeserving.

You can't force someone to be forgiving. But if someone in your life is carrying around that heavy backpack, why don't you offer to carry it for them for a while. If that someone is you, Jesus has offered to carry it for you. Let us pray.

*Thanks to Jennie Pollack for her review of "Philomena"