

THE TABLE OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35

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I delivered my first sermon ever at Stetson Chapel on the Kalamazoo College campus in May of 1980, one month before I graduated. I don't remember everything about that sermon, although it's possible that I still have a copy of it somewhere. I do remember the scripture text. I'd selected it well in advance, and I believe that I had begun working on the sermon early.

That first sermon was delivered on a Friday. We had chapel every Friday. It wasn't mandatory, but it was pretty well-attended. We typically had good music and interesting speakers. Often a faculty member would speak, or a guest who was on campus. And in the spring, some of the graduating seniors, especially the religion majors, would be asked to speak. So I'd begun working on my sermon. It was a big deal for me. I wanted to do a good job.

And then, three days before that sermon, I was a survivor of a major tornado. Google "Kalamazoo Tornado" and it will come up - May 13, 1980. I was actually sitting in the passenger seat of a car, when the eye of the tornado went right by us, shattering the windshield, and causing a tree to land on the front of our car.

As I sat down at the typewriter a few days later to finish my sermon, I had a compelling sermon illustration to use! I incorporated the story of surviving the tornado right into my sermon.

In all of the years of preaching since then (and all my colleagues know this phenomenon), I've been keenly aware each week of what's happening around me and how I may or may not be able to use each conversation, each book I read, each movie I watch in an upcoming sermon. It's a quirky aspect of ministry.

So fast forward to this week, and the awareness all week, in the back of my mind, that the sermon topic is forgiveness. Just like that week in Kalamazoo, fate handed me a perfect sermon illustration. I woke up Wednesday morning and began the day as I usually do, with a cup of coffee and my journal. I called to mind my day's schedule and all that I wanted to accomplish. I got to work, led Bible Study, grabbed my salad out of the refrigerator, and ate half of it. A parishioner dropped by my office, mentioned the name of another parishioner, and I stopped in my tracks. Oh no, oh no, oh no. I had forgotten a lunch appointment! I'm the one who had made the lunch appointment! I invited this parishioner to lunch! I couldn't believe my carelessness. I had not looked at my calendar. I had just assumed I knew what was on my schedule.

With great embarrassment I picked up the phone. The parishioner on the other end, the one whom I'd stood up, could not have been more gracious. She laughed, she forgave me before I ever even asked, and she even dropped by the church later that afternoon with a small gift for me. You talk about someone who embodies forgiveness! I found myself thinking about how good she made me feel, and wondering, "Would I have done the same? Would I have been as quick to forgive as she was? Would I have been able to pass along the feeling that not only was I forgiven, there was absolutely no hint of a grudge or resentment...".

A sermon illustration, and a lesson in humility, both dropped into my lap.

Our topic is The Table of Forgiveness, because four days from now, many of us will be gathering around tables for Thanksgiving Dinner. The table is crowded, you are elbow to elbow with your relatives. On one side of you is the brother-in-law who has the NRA sticker on his pick-up truck and on the other side of you is the aunt who drives a Prius that still sports a Hillary bumpersticker. Happy Thanksgiving!

The topic is forgiveness, because this time last year, you and your uncle got into an argument about politics and you haven't spoken since. The topic is forgiveness, because our families are petri dishes for resentment.

We hold onto past hurts. We tuck them away in the drawers of our minds and hearts. You don't see them and dwell on them constantly, but open the right drawer and bam - the wound is open wide again.

A sharp word spoken by a family member can injure us more deeply; a joke told at our expense by a relative is more painful. We have higher expectations for our family. The family table is where we hope to feel at home, after all. It's where we hope to feel a sense of belonging. Our expectations are high, perhaps unreasonably so. We look at other people's families and idealize them...we see everyone's family pictures on Facebook and they always look happy!

What would it mean for the Thanksgiving table to become the table of forgiveness? Let me start with what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that you are condoning bad behavior. It certainly doesn't mean that abuse is ever OK. And forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. We can't work towards a more just world if we forget injustice. We need to remember the Holocaust and slavery and so many other acts that seek to reduce our humanity, and it's not helpful to try to bury within our own memo-

ries the hurts done to us. Forgiveness is not a gift we give to the person who has hurt us. Forgiveness is a gift we give to ourselves. It frees us. It releases the power that the hurt has upon us.

When you walk into Thanksgiving dinner and look at the relative who has hurt you, he or she may very well not know they wounded you. And you may act and look the same to them whether you forgive them or not. But forgiveness will feel different to you. You will feel lighter. It's amazing how heavy grudges and resentments can be to carry.

In our story for today from the gospel of Matthew, Peter is trying to figure out exactly how to live as a disciple of Jesus. The number seven is a holy number, a number that is significant in the Bible. So Peter says, "Jesus, are we to forgive each other perfectly, just as the number seven indicates perfection?" And Jesus says, "Yes, even beyond perfectly. In fact, forgiveness is an absolute, a non-negotiable." Forgiveness is, then, essential to the Christian life. It is impossible to know the life God wants for us if we do not practice forgiveness.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a story. If he were here today, he might tell it something like this. The owner of a coffee shop loans an employee 250 million dollars. Yes, that absurd amount. Jesus gave that absurd amount when he told the parable. He meant to get people's attention. And he meant for people to not take the story literally. Somehow, the owner of a coffee shop has 250 million and has loaned it to his employee. He tells the employee it's time to pay up. The employee, who makes \$25,000 a year of course cannot pay. The boss says, "Well, then you'll have to sell your car and your house and give me everything you have." "Please, please," the em-

employee begs. My children are doing so well in school. Don't make me sell my house. It would ruin my life and break my wife's heart. I'll do anything. Please. I beg you."

The boss feels sorry for the man and says, "Oh, just forget it." He forgives the debt.

So the employee walks out to the parking lot, towards his car, and sees one of the kids who works part-time at the coffee shop after school. He's heading into work. The employee grabs the kid by the collar and says, "Hey, didn't I loan you ten bucks last week? When are you going to pay me back?" The boss has observed all of this and fires the employee on the spot. "After all I've done for you, this is how you treat a colleague? You're done, out of here. No more mercy for you."

It's a story full of exaggeration and hyperbole, meant to open our eyes to the big picture. Do we appreciate the gracious gifts God showers upon us? Those gifts that are dropped right at our feet, right on our doorstep?

In the parable, the employee clearly did not fully realize what a phenomenal gift he had been given. The hugest debt in the world had been forgiven! If he had truly understood the magnitude of that gift, and been grateful for it, he would have been changed. His behavior would have been different. He would have then not treated the student in the parking lot so shabbily.

If we are truly grateful, our lives will be different. We will live differently. We will treat one another differently. Grateful people are happier people, more generous people, more forgiving people.

When we sit down at tables with one another, at the coffee hour table here at church, at the Thanksgiving table with many friends and relatives, at tables for two or

four, at the school lunchroom, in the workplace cafeteria, can we see each other with new, more grateful, more forgiving eyes? Can we see that we are each the products of where we've come from and the experiences we've had? In this time when we are so divided, so polarized, can we give each other a gentle benefit of the doubt, and believe that most people are really trying their best to be good people? The fact that someone else doesn't see the world the way I do does not make that person bad or wrong. In this time of rapid dramatic change, I constantly tell myself that the fact that someone else doesn't embrace change as quickly as I do doesn't mean that person is morally deficient.

We each have much to learn from each other. Our faith tells us that we were each created in God's image. The more we know about each other, the more we will know about God. The closer we are to each other, the closer we will be to God. When we understand why someone holds a different opinion, when we hear that person's story, we then begin to see them in that person in his or her full humanity. That person is no longer a political opponent, but a child of God. I may still disagree with the positions that person holds, but I understand the person better, and I am better able to treat that person with respect and dignity. She is not someone to be "won over"; he is not my enemy. We are all trying our best to make our way in this complicated and rapidly-changing world.

Let us enter into this week of Thanksgiving grateful for the unbelievably extravagant gifts of God, with hearts ready to forgive, and ears ready to listen to one another's life stories.