

So Jesus has this habit of preaching and teaching about things that sound really beautiful and aspirational – things that sound really good. They'd be good phrases to post on your wall to motivate you. But when it actually comes down to doing them, it's much harder. Jesus says things like, "Love your enemies." Wonderful! What a great idea, Jesus! "Turn the other cheek." Okay, sure. "Pray for those who hurt you." "Forgive." All of those sound like wonderful things, but when we are faced with actually having to practice those things, they become much, much harder.

I can think of a time when I was living in Scotland, when I was getting a degree from the University of St. Andrews. At the time, I was living in the international dorms, and I hung out with a group of three other girls. I thought we were all friends, but it came to a point where they started planning trips without me and talking about me behind my back. I remember how hurt I felt when I finally learned about all of this. It was painful finding out that they didn't actually like me very much and that they began intentionally excluding me. Eventually, I moved back to the United States, and I never saw any of them again. But I remember noticing years later when one of those girls in particular would come into my mind and I would just feel this rage in my heart. I was still so angry and hurt by people I hadn't even talked to in years. And it was in one of those moments where I realized that I was holding on to the hurt and I had not forgiven them. I had been letting that anger live rent free in my head for all of that time. It wasn't easy to let go of. Forgiveness is something that becomes a whole lot harder when we bring it out of the abstract and we have an actual name and face attached to it.

We know what it is like to see or experience hurt when there's betrayal, abuse of power, lies, or broken trust. And there are losses that come in life that cannot ever be restored, returned, or repaid. Forgiveness sounds really great until there is actually something to forgive.

And so Peter comes to Jesus and he begins with this question: "How many times must I forgive? Seven times?" I think Peter probably thinks that he's being really generous with this number seven. You may know that the number seven in Scripture is usually tied to the idea completeness or of perfection. And so Peter is essentially coming to Jesus and saying, "Jesus, if I forgive seven times, I am a wonderful person. I have reached completion and perfection. Right, right?" He's expecting Jesus to affirm that or even to say, "Oh Peter, that's a bit excessive. You don't have to go that far!" Peter is asking, "Have I done enough? When has somebody exhausted their forgiveness quota?" And Jesus answers him: "Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Or as some translations render it, seventy times seven, which is the far greater number of 490. But in his response, Jesus is not just giving Peter a really big number to count towards. He's not telling Peter, "You still need to keep track." It's not as if Peter will be finished needing to forgive once he hits a magic number. He's telling Peter, "Stop keeping the ledger altogether! Stop counting! You can't count high enough to reach the number of times that you have to forgive!" And so, Jesus tells a story to illustrate his point.

It is tempting for us to look at this parable and to spiritualize it, but Jesus is telling a story about an economic system that would have been very familiar to his hearers. Often, when we hear this parable of the unforgiving servant, we immediately equate God with the king, and that is a fair equation. And we equate humanity with the indebted servant and debt with sin and cancellation of debt with the forgiveness of sin. That dimension is absolutely present, and we will talk about that today, but there is another layer to this parable as well.

Jesus's original audience would have also heard a story about their actual political and economic world, because they lived amidst kings, and taxes, and debt, and imprisonment and slavery, and economic exploitation. They lived under a Roman imperial hierarchy, with Caesar, and governors and client kings. There were wealthy landowners and local elites, tax collectors and administrators. And then, of course, there were the people that Jesus was talking to, most of whom were living at the bottom of that hierarchy. They were the farmers, the fishermen, the craftspeople, the laborers. And money in the Roman Empire? Well, it flowed upward.

Caesar needed money from his empire, but so did the governors and the local leaders. Each layer of this hierarchy took their wealth from the layer below – so the people at the bottom were getting squeezed the most. Money flowed upward, but pressure flowed downward. And Jesus' hearers would have been the ones experiencing the most pressure in this economic system.

So we come to this story and we hear immediately a telling detail: the servant owed the king 10,000 talents. When we look at that we might see a big number, but we don't just know how much money that actually was. Josephus, a Jewish historian in the time of Jesus, makes mention of the Herod Antipas' revenue from his territories, including Galilee. According to Josephus, one year's revenue from all of his territory was like around 3,000 talents. That's like a the national GDP. So 10,000 talents is an extraordinary amount of money. We're talking about the revenue of a kingdom. This is not a tiny amount. This is not just some personal debt that is owed. The servant in this story is probably someone who had a very high position in the household of the king and was likely a royal administrator. Jesus' listeners would have heard this story, knowing the exorbitant amount of money he was talking about, and they would have known exactly where that money came from. It came from them, the people at the bottom.

Debt was not something that was just metaphorical. Jesus wasn't just talking in spiritual allegory alone. In Jesus's world, debt was very common and could exist in a number of ways. It could mean loss of land. It could mean loss of livelihood. It could mean loss of freedom. And Jesus uses that debt language in the way he teaches his disciples to pray. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus stands within the line of Israel's tradition as well, when he presents debt as something to be liberated from. In Deuteronomy, we read about the idea of periodic debt relief. In Leviticus, there's this concept of the year of Jubilee, where every so often, all debts are forgiven and land is returned to the original holders. These laws were meant to break the cycles of economic injustice – to prevent wealth from being further and further concentrated in the hands of a few. The prophets also continually condemn practices of exploitation that harm the most vulnerable.

And so, the servant who owes an extraordinary amount of money kneels down at the feet of the king and cries out, "Oh, please be patient with me, I will repay everything!" That, of course, is a bold-faced lie. There is no way that he could possibly do that. Repayment was never ever going to happen as long as he lives. There was no way one person could come up with the GDP of the entire region and pay it back to the king. The king could have made a number of choices regarding the servant's debt. He could have renegotiated the debt or set up a payment plan or reduced interest. But he doesn't do any of that. He just forgives the servant for this entire debt – this absurd, ridiculous, impossible amount of debt. The servant experiences unimaginable mercy. It is so much that one could not even comprehend it.

But then the story takes a turn. One might think that after having experienced such mercy, the servant would go and practice the same. But no, he's living according to the idea of "grace for me but not for thee." Just after he has been released from his crushing debt, he immediately goes out and encounters another servant who owes him 100 denarii. That's not a small amount – probably a few months wages. But compared to 10,000 talents, it's nothing. It's a drop in a bucket, it's minuscule. The debt is real, but it can't compare to the debt for which he has just been forgiven.

The servant grabs the man by his throat and demands, "Pay me what you owe, pay me what you owe!" The king, in releasing the debt of the servant, breaks the cycle of exploitation from the top. But then, the forgiven servant immediately restarts it down the line. He experiences mercy, but he does not allow that mercy to transform him. "Grace for me, accounting for everyone else."

The parable Jesus tells is about more than just ceasing to hold grudges against people. In this parable that he tells to Peter and others, Jesus is imagining an alternative world, an alternative economy. The world that they live in, the Roman Empire, is organized around debt, scorekeeping, punishment and retaliation – the whole idea of "Pay what you owe!" An empire asks who can I make pay? But Jesus asks his followers to break that cycle.

And so instead of that pressure from the top flowing downward, Jesus asks his followers to imagine mercy flowing downwards and outwards, so that the person who has been released becomes someone who also releases others. And that grace that we experience it as followers of Jesus changes we exercise any type of power we might possess. A posture of forgiveness, of mercy, is countercultural – both for the disciples in Jesus time, but also for us today. Much like the Roman Empire, our culture is also very good at keeping score. We're always asking who owes whom and who won, who lost, who was humiliated, who gets the last word, and who deserves punishment. Retaliation often gets portrayed as strength. Political life can often organize around this whole idea of making enemies pay. "Pay what you owe me." That's the language of empire talking.

But Jesus teaches the alternative to "Pay what you owe" – forgiveness. Much like we talked about last week, we want to make sure forgiveness isn't something that's weaponized against people who have suffered real harm. Forgiveness does not mean pretending nothing happened, and it doesn't mean calling evil things good. Forgiveness does not mean staying in an abusive relationship. It doesn't mean abandoning boundaries or avoiding consequences. It doesn't mean automatically restoring authority or trust. Forgiveness does not automatically mean reconciliation. But forgiveness also does not mean the absence of accountability.

In last week's gospel reading which contained the previous several verses of Matthew 18, we looked at what to do when harm occurs in a community and how to confront that harm. This week's teaching builds upon those verses and introduces mercy. Showing mercy, however, does not mean we do not seek or speak the truth about harm. We seek truth while relinquishing vengeance. It means that we seek to hold one another accountable while at the same time we do not dehumanize a person who has caused harm. It means practicing mercy without denying the harm that has been done. Ultimately, forgiveness is the refusal to let another person's wrongdoing determine what kind of person I will become and what type of community we will become. Let me say that again. Forgiveness is the refusal to let another person's wrongdoing dictate who we will be. It keeps us from saying, "You hurt me, so I'm going to hurt you back."

Instead, it's acknowledging, "You hurt me. But I am not going to organize my life around hurting you back. I am not going to be about payback. I will not allow your hatred to teach me how to hate." When we forgive, we can pursue both justice and accountability without becoming trapped in vengeance.

Forgiveness is what breaks the cycle of mercilessness. When we think about the way our world works when someone has wronged us, our tendency is to keep score. You hurt me, I'm going to hurt you back. And then you hurt me more, and then I hurt you more. And then your family remembers and my family remembers, and on and on down the line it goes - the cycle of pain and payback continues. "Pay what you owe." It's a ledger that goes on keeping the accounting. But forgiveness, mercy, interrupts that seemingly never-ending cycle.

One person who comes to mind when I think about forgiveness and mercy Nelson Mandela. So you may know he spent twenty seven years in prison under the apartheid rule in South Africa. When apartheid came to an end and he was eventually released and elected president, he was faced with a choice. He could either reverse the hierarchy now that the power balance had reversed. He could have sought vengeance, or he could seek to build something different.

Mandela understood that if he took that "pay what you owe" approach, that apartheid would continue to shape South Africa in dangerous ways, even after it had formally ended. And so he was very intentional about taking symbolic action to demonstrate this alternative path, not the path of vengeance, but a path of accountability and a path of a new possibility. He knew that he needed to disrupt the cycle of violence and domination, so he continually made symbolic choices towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

One example came during the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Rugby isn't really a big sport around here, but it is very popular in a lot of European countries and former colonies. Rugby had been long-associated with white Afrikaner identity, and for many black South Africans, rugby felt almost synonymous with the apartheid establishment. Mandela could have treated rugby as a symbol with contempt, but instead, when South Africa reached the final, he walked onto the field wearing the team's jersey, the jersey of a team his own supporters had once regarded as a symbol of oppression. The crowd began chanting Mandela's name – it became a symbol that the new South Africa was not going to be built by just deciding who gets to be hated now.

Now that didn't mean pretending apartheid didn't happen. Under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee worked to tell the truth of what happened under apartheid – about torture, murder, disappearances, and abuse. Families were able to tell the stories that the apartheid state tried to erase. Perpetrators seeking forgiveness had to disclose the things they had done. Forgiveness was not silence or pretending like harm wasn't done. It wasn't historical amnesia. Both Tutu and Mandela understood that South Africa was faced with a choice – it could stay trapped in an endless cycle of violence and retaliation, or they could say together, "The cycle stops here."

South Africa is still struggling today. There are still deep wounds that exist. I don't want to look through rose tinted glasses and say, everything is peachy in South Africa because some debts can never actually be repaid.

Some things can be taken that can never be returned. For some of us, it could be a child, our childhood, or a relationship or safety, or years of life or trust. For South Africa, there are wounds that can never be

fully healed. We can spend our lives demanding, “Pay what you owe me,” but most of the time that debt can never actually be repaid. Forgiveness is really about the difficult work of releasing our own claim to vengeance. It doesn't erase what happened. It doesn't ask us to pretend that like nothing happened, but it keeps what happened from continuing to control our lives.

Jesus himself breaks the ledger. Rome operated according to an economy of debt and of retaliation. Rome decided that Jesus needed to pay what he owed for his own insubordination, for the threat that he posed to their order. And so Rome exacted payment upon Jesus and the cost was his life. Jesus was beaten and mocked and crucified. And yet Jesus models for us the way of forgiveness. He did not answer violence with violence. He did not return mocking with mocking. God's response to the cross is not to build a bigger cross for Rome. God's response to Rome to death is to answer death with resurrection, death with life. God answers the violence of Rome, the “pay what you owe” of Rome, with the risen Christ showing up and saying, “Peace be with you.”

And so we, as disciples of Jesus, are meant to be hearers of this parable today too. We, too, are called to practice the economy of Jesus kingdom. Every act of forgiveness is not just conflict resolution. It is the practice of living in another kingdom. In this kingdom that Jesus calls us to, mercy is the currency.

Mercy and grace interrupt cycles of vengeance. Forgiveness throws away the ledger and says, “We don't keep count anymore.” When we receive mercy, we are meant to become people who also extend mercy. The kingdom of God refuses to organize the world around “Pay what you owe.” Instead, Jesus calls us to be people courageous enough to say, “The debt is real, the harm it does matter. Justice still matters. But this cycle, this stops here.” Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Amen.