

An Allowing God  
Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12. Matthew 18:21-35  
Pentecost 16A, September 17, 2023  
First congregational UCC, Eagle River

This morning, we hear about forgiveness. The one who would be the rock of the church, Peter wonders if he should forgive another member of the community as many as seven times. He is feeling pretty reasonable in offering that number that is more than the fingers of one hand. But Jesus responds with a number that we cannot easily track. What about 70 times 7? Then Jesus tells of the grace of forgiveness that has no limit.

Jesus is building a new community. He is telling us that the foundational role of community is forgiveness. The impact of the parable lies in the difference between the two debts and the contrasting outcomes. It is suggested that the first individual that the King summons to him is probably not a slave<sup>1</sup>, rather a servant who would have responsibilities in accounting or collections on behalf of the King. When the disciples heard of this debt of 10 thousand talents it would have had impact! Unimaginable! A talent was the proceeds of 15 years of labor and 10 thousand was the largest possible numerical unit at that time. Boring tells us that the annual tax income for all of Herod the Great's territories was nine hundred talents per year; 10 thousand would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria<sup>2</sup>. Imagine the loss of this income through the servant's mismanagement and recognize that it is an amount that cannot be recovered. It was unpayable. Yet, instead of pursuing punishment, selling this servant and his family, the King forgives the entire debt. The grace demonstrated by the parable makes forgiveness beyond our imagining.

Coming off his experience of this enormous grace, this servant encounters one who owes him a small, manageable amount. This debt could have easily been repaid. And, in spite of the life preserving forgiveness the servant had received from the King, he shows no remorse in seizing his debtor the throat and throwing him into prison. The servant remained unchanged by grace as he demands repayment.

Our initial thoughts of the parable may linger with the the quality of the judgement. We might review our encounters and our practices forming judgment. Have I/we ever managed to achieve that wow-factor either as an offense or in administering judgment? Have we ever been so lacking in our forgiveness as to demand repayment that was beyond what I/we may have demanded for ourself, or, that limited another's life?

These questions are helpful for us. We may prod our conscience with these questions to imagine what God expects of us. But, that line of thinking reflects Peter's original question; we are looking for the boundaries of reasonable. "Must we forgive as many as 7 times?" "What must we forgive and how much must we forgive, really?"

Then Jesus delivers the punchline in the parable: The King hears of the servant's actions and now hands him over to be tortured until he can repay his entire debt, which *we* know cannot be done. Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 19:35) God has provided this generous, compassionate, life-giving example of what grace looks like—forgiving what is unforgiveable. Perhaps Jesus wants us to know that in emulating God, forgiveness must come from the center of life, a place where God rules our actions. To stubbornly hold judgment in our heart, when we are not able to forgive or when we refuse to forgive from our heart, there is a constricting torture at the center of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, M. Eugene, Craddock, Fred B., The People's New Testament Commentary, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. P 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

In Matthew's gospel, this parable appears to have God as a stand-in for the King, God being the one who punishes. When Luke tells this story, it is simply a King. To imagine that God would forgive graciously only to turn around to punish later is not consistent with our understanding of God shown to us through Jesus. This conflict of reporting is more likely one of Matthew's interpretation and not one of Jesus' teaching. Richard Rohr, a contemplative, Jesuit priest, discusses the dilemma that humans have in imagining a relationship with an extreme, grace-filled God. He says: "Grace is not what God does, but who God is". When we have a glimpse of this grace is to *be* in the presence of God. Rohr calls God the "the Great Allower" and acknowledges how frustrating it is to see the *indiscriminate forgiveness* flowing about in the world, always challenging our preferred judgment. Rohr says: "God's total allowing of everything has in fact become humanity's major complaint. Conservatives so want God to smite sinners that they find every natural disaster to be a proof of just that.....Liberals reject God because God allows holocausts and torture and does not fit inside (our) seeming logic. If we were truly being honest, God is both a scandal and a supreme disappointment to most of us."<sup>3</sup> Maybe we just find this text more challenging than we feel it is worth. ***We would prefer a God of domination and control to a God of allowing.*** We would make God like us.

However, this *is* where Jesus has placed us today—imagining our capacity for grace-filled forgiveness. If we were to do nothing other than watch and temper our judgments, we would experience a growth in spirit. Catching oneself in the act of separating from one another and then substantiating that action with a righteousness judgment gives us the space to also choose a different behavior. We may choose to be opened by grace and flowing with forgiveness for persons around us.

We are able to name a number of places where we have various capacities to forgive actions or issues. The issues may be minor about farm to table food sources, saving trees and buying electric cars. They can be more impactful to household expenses, climate change and taxes. They can be life-changing as gun ownership, rising drug use and school violence. You might have already had a twinge just from hearing how I categorized these issues. Information comes to us through this lens of our judgment and we take actions that support our opinion for good or for ill. We interact with others through this lens of our opinions; relationships form, also for good or for ill. Perhaps the tension of some of these discussions and relationships form in your memory. Jesus is suggesting that we place each thought, each action and each relationship into God's grace to clearly see the world through God's eyes. This practice of forgiveness is as difficult for humans as we have imagined and as transformational as we might hope.

I want to introduce David Carlson who has a compelling personal story that he has turned into a success story. After spending a good portion of his young adult life in prison, Carlson started CC We Adapt. Because of his experiences and his success in rebuilding his life, prisoners in Eau Claire County do not leave jail at 6:00 AM with no clothing, no transportation and no place to stay. However, his success does not prevent others from holding judgment over his color, his previous experience, the challenged and challenging clients whom he helps and the completely different service model that he brings into community. Our forgiveness is challenged.

He formed CC We Adapt to use his experience to help formerly incarcerated individuals to become whole and to then train them to mentor and support others who are coming out of the prison system. Housing is owned and/or leased by CC We Adapt to provide stable, safe housing without threat of eviction. And the strong and consistent use of mentors, have made sustainable housing successful. Another aspect of his program is understanding the client, knowing the experience of incarceration and what that recovery looks like. Carlson's method acknowledges recovery is slow and support must adapt and change. The support is necessary and must be steady for the journey to stability. One needs intense supervision and instruction in the first weeks. Mentors use their experience to guide another. As one gains stability, the mentor adapts the use of guidance and support. The relationship of these mentors with clients is one of radical accountability and acceptance. These individuals

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<sup>3</sup> Rohr, Richard, Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. 2013. P 18-19.

who have been incarcerated do not need to reach *our* standards. Instead, they need to see God's love in the eyes of those around them. Acceptance and forgiveness allow them to meet their *own* standards of approval, perhaps for the first time.

We are the church, gathered here today, looking for a more excellent way. We are given this gospel to transform our lives and the life of the world. Each Sunday, it is these conversations that call us back again and again to who we are as followers of Jesus. Today, we are asked to challenge our capacity to forgive. We are to embody this grace, to share this grace and to teach this grace of forgiveness. In this time in which we are living, there is an urgency to this call that requires our full attention.

The September Atlantic has an article that I recommend to interested readers. David Brooks writes, "How America Got Mean"<sup>4</sup>. It is a compelling argument for an institution that teaches and mentors a moral life. After the mid 1900's there was noticeable decline of organizations teaching moral standards. Churches are named as one of these organizations, but so are many others. Brooks identifies and follows an interesting thread of experience connecting people who turn away from these formative organizations to join politics as if politics is the force that will build a better world. To engage in politics when we don't have a commonly held moral code, allows the individual within the public realm or the public movement to name what is moral and what is healthy for our community. Brooks ends saying (quote) "healthy moral ecologies don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended by people who think and talk in moral terms, who try to model and inculcate moral behavior, who understand that we have to build moral communities because on our own, we are all selfish and flawed."<sup>5</sup> Amen?!

I hear this as a clear call to be followers of Jesus outside of these walls. This might seem beyond us, and we can only do what we are able. But *we remember* that God is faithful. William Hutchinson Murray says, "Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: **that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.**" Imagine a moment, when we create a movement of forgiveness, or an opportunity from which to share forgiveness. Let it be so clear to you that you can feel it in your body, see it accomplished before you. It is in *that* moment; God pours into that idea as God's own. When we as a body of Christ, learn to live out of who we are and what God has inspired in us, remarkable synergies emerge. Resources appear. Talent emerges. New constituents join the stream of energy<sup>6</sup>. Let us stand with God in solidarity and acceptance of others who see the world in another way. Amen

## PRAYER

Grace Giving God, Your holy word is given to inspire us. It does not always prepare us. Instead, we are alerted to the surprise of your presence and your invitation to join you in bringing your Love into the world. We are formed by these stories to expect what cannot be expected and to hope for things that would otherwise be impossible. When we are broken out of our set ways, when we are softened by the vulnerabilities of our brothers and sisters of the world, we are changed by wanting for them the love that you placed within us.

Let us use these words of scripture to see how you have been present through the ages and how you are present still. We *see our* human nature in these stories and see how others have responded and have been formed in your love. Always, your tool of change is love and more love, redemption and again redemption. We hear your voice and we open our hearts to the Spirit's call to us. Come Holy Spirit Come.

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<sup>4</sup> Brooks, David, "How America Got Mean", The Atlantic, September 2023. Pp 68-76.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p 76.

<sup>6</sup> Beaumont, Susan, How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2019. p129.

Holy One, our prayers support your presence around the many individuals whose lives have been ended, disrupted and irreparably changed by disasters both human and natural. Hold our hearts open to sustained compassion for our brothers and sisters whom we may never meet. Our world is clutched by ambition and judgment that brings war and violence. Use your transforming love to heal even these human creations of division. We pray for their healing and forgiveness, for our freedom and theirs.

Mother/Father God, We pray for all in our community and in this church whose lives are constricted by anger and separation, who suffer from loss and loneliness, who are overcome by grief and by sickness of the heart and the body. We ask that you would use us as an instrument of your presence and compassion. Let us be in service to those who wait upon you with anxiety and bring your hope. Pour your spirit upon us that we might be changed and the world around us might be changed through us.

Forgiving God, in these quiet moments, we come to You in prayer, some of us will come to You in words, some in sighs too deep for words. Hear us, as we pray and open our hearts to accept Your response.

And, now we gather our prayers together with the words of the Lord's Prayer