

“The Tortured Life of Keeping Score”

Matthew 18:21-35

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Proper 19

September 17, 2023

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart,” Jesus concludes. On the face of it, the teaching is as clear as Jesus was back when he taught the disciples the Lord’s prayer. “For if you forgive others their trespasses,” he told them then, “your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

It’s the ultimate reciprocal relationship. You only get as much forgiveness as you give. This seems to be true, at least relationally. The more exacting you are with other people, the more they tend to treat you the same way. The more they point out your flaws, the more likely you are to point out theirs. The more they fail to forgive you for every little thing, the more you tend to keep count in the same way.

But isn’t forgiveness the very thing that is supposed to interrupt this tit for tat dynamic that builds the grievance arms race in the first place? That never-ending game of “he started it” that you learn at a really young age? The keeping score dynamic that builds in much bigger ways and ultimately leads to violence? Isn’t making God’s forgiveness contingent on us offering forgiveness to each other just another form of that same quid pro quo economy that Jesus is supposed to be freeing us from by submitting to the cross instead of overthrowing Caesar in a bloody revolution that replaces one tyrant with another?

The answers aren’t exactly clear here which is normally the case when Jesus teaches with a parable. On the one hand you have the fantastically unreasonable generosity of the king who Jesus implies represents God. On the other hand you have the king’s top servant who owes the king 10,000 talents. One talent was equal to the wages of a manual laborer for fifteen years. 10,000 is the number you would use in biblical times to represent the largest possible numerical unit. As scholars Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock point out, “the annual tax income for all of Herod the Great’s territories was nine hundred talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria.”¹ 10,000 talents is a ridiculously large number meant to be beyond calculation. The debt is truly unpayable. The king’s response to his servant’s request for patience is equally, fantastically ridiculous. He doesn’t just extend patience, he forgives the debt.

¹ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2004, p. 77.

The kingdom of heaven can be compared to this, Jesus says at the top of the parable.² Jesus suggests that we cannot free ourselves from what we owe God. We've been given life - there's no way to repay that. Also, we sin. We mess up, more than we let on, probably more than we even know. And God is incredibly generous with us, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love as the ancient texts say. God's realm is marked by this incredible generosity.

And how do we respond to this generosity? To the gift of life we did not earn. To having everything we owe God not held against us? We respond like the servant who has received fantastically generous grace only to turn around and be stingy with each other instead. The servant, departing immediately from the presence of the king who has just forgiven his ridiculously large debt in a ridiculously gracious way, runs into a servant below him on the pecking order who owes him about 1/600,000th of the amount he owed the king.³ No mercy, no grace, just a harsh response- thrown into debtor's prison until he pays up.

Word gets back to the king and he revokes his unreasonably generous mercy choosing eternal torture instead. If you want God's forgiveness, be careful to extend it to others. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." And we're back to where we started - Matthew's reciprocal relationship between us and God. Or are we?

This parable actually started on the heels of last week's teaching that wrestled with the conditions under which someone is kicked out of the community. (Matthew 18:15-20). Since Jesus recognizes that there are conditions under which someone should be booted from the group, clearly forgiving someone doesn't necessarily mean tolerating their bad behavior. That's important information since forgiveness is often talked about in just that way. That if you forgive someone you let them walk all over you. Clearly that's not the case. *Bad behavior needs to be challenged*, according to Matthew. It's challenged in a particular way as we saw last week - face to face, individual conversation intended to give a strained relationship the best possible chance of being restored in a new way. When that fails, two or three more witnesses are added to the mix to make sure that all parties are held accountable. And when that fails, the church itself gets in the mix to try to get things back on track. Only after all that effort is someone to be temporarily put out of the community.

This week we see again God's persistence in getting them back. "What's a reasonable number of times to forgive someone who sins against you? Peter asks, offering seven times as a possible answer, which feels pretty generous to me. But not to Jesus since he offers instead seventy times, as this translation reads or perhaps even seventy times seven, an equally possible translation. I think we all can agree that

² Heaven here isn't a place. Heaven is a way of reverentially referring to God without using God's name. So kingdom of heaven is the same as kingdom of God in Matthew's Gospel which is really about the realm of God, the economy of God. See Boring and Craddock, 19.

³ Boring and Craddock, p. 77.

forgiving someone 490 times is above and beyond most of our forgiveness tolerance levels and probably an unreasonable thing to do.

Yet that's what Jesus teaches his disciples we owe to anyone who has wronged us. *Continual forgiveness*. Not a forgiveness that is defined by letting a person's bad behavior repeat itself again and again. But a forgiveness that involves *releasing that person from a sort of debt they've incurred by virtue of sinning against you*. Refusing to hold their bad behavior against them in your heart or said differently -refusing to let their bad behavior define the essence of their personhood. Remaining open, even expectant that the person might find the healing they are needing and that the relationship might, at some point, be restored. Forgiveness, understood this way, is just as much about *protecting the purity of the heart of the person who has been wronged* as it is about releasing the wrongdoer. *Preserving the heart's natural orientation toward grace* in each other. *Refusing to let the heart be hardened* by the expectation of sin.

We are living through a time right now where the heart's natural orientation toward grace has been tested by lots of bad behavior - bad behavior at every level of government, bad behavior in the Church most publicly in the sex abuse crisis and coverup in the Roman Catholic Church, but also the Church's partisan endorsements of candidates whose policies and ethics are so far from Jesus' teaching as to be absurd; and bad behavior by our fellow citizens - from police brutality toward people of color, to neighbors turning to the gun to settle disrespect at neighborhood festivals and on college campuses, to the Jan. 6 attack against our government, to just common indecency at all levels. All of our hearts have been affected and are being affected right now by all that bad behavior. And it's very hard to love your neighbor if you are oriented toward fearing them, expecting them to do bad things.

In fact, sometimes I wonder if some of the hurt that some of us have experienced between and among each other in recent years has less to do with someone sinning against you and more to do with all the accumulated hurt we carry from deferred dreams and unfulfilled desires experienced in the world we now live in. We are so oriented to being beaten down and disappointed that we arrive here positioned for someone else to let us down.

Forgiveness, Jesus teaches us, is the way to interrupt that dynamic. To choose to stop keeping count of who's wronged you so you can instead bring the expectation of God's grace here and into more places in the world where it's needed. And yes, your orientation toward grace won't make you immune to bad behavior. It won't stop it when it comes. But it will miraculously multiply and extend much farther into the community than bad behavior ever does. There is a realm of God's grace, fantastically ridiculous grace that expands from your heart to the world like a native flower that takes root easily because it belongs there.

There's just one piece of this story that remains a puzzle. If God's grace is so ridiculously fantastic, and the disciples are called to forgive continuously, infinitely -

seventy times seven worth of forgiveness, then how can God ultimately turn to torturing those who do not forgive? Doesn't that go against the very nature of God, the foundation for forgiveness itself? Some scholars say the last two verses don't really belong to the original story - the bit about the king handing over the servant to be tortured and Jesus saying his heavenly father will do the same to us if we don't forgive. Those scholars argue that the story actually ends in verse 33 with a question - "should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" Those scholars point out that parables are supposed to preserve questions and comparisons without becoming allegories where king=God; debt=sin; first servant=one who is forgiven lots of sin against God; second servant=one who has committed 'ordinary sin against fellow human being.' "It is better," two scholars write, "to let the story remain unallegorized, so that it is an earthly king [not God] who reneges on his original gracious forgiveness, and let it illustrate, in an analogous way, the awfulness of failing to forgive as God forgives."⁴

But I wonder, too, if Matthew's Jesus is doing his best to get across to us just how central forgiveness is to abundant life with God. If we learned how to practice it better, we'd be so much more free in the world. Free to love with abandon, free to experience the very grace that each of us is able to bring right now into community instead of expecting community to deliver it up to us as payment for our efforts, free to bring to the world more of the healing and the help that so many are hungry for. I wonder if Jesus isn't warning us that a failure to practice forgiveness again and again is its own kind of tortured life, which is entirely in our control to change. I wonder if he's already thinking about the cross to which he's headed, grappling with a way to share that his decision to die there isn't a decision to accept bad behavior. It is a decision to expose it, simultaneously offering up something so much better - life as the gift that it is, a holy offering given for the sake of love in the world. The realm of God that's open and available to this community right now.

⁴ Boring and Craddock, 77.