

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon Title: "Transformed by Forgiveness"

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To forgive can be the most powerful and, at the same time, one of the hardest thing one does in life. It's powerful because when we are able to forgive another – it lightens the burden that we carry for we no longer hold resentment or anger, hostility or any other feeling that can come from holding something that one can release in forgiveness. And yet, it can be the hardest things one will do in life – especially when an offense continues, it perpetuates, or we simply can't find it within ourselves to offer forgiveness, for whatever reason. And this is exactly why, I believe, Peter raises the question that began our scripture reading today – How often should I forgive? He knows the power and he know the difficulty. And I love that Peter says, "as many as seven times", like this is a big goal – surely not that many, right Jesus? But Jesus makes the extent of forgiveness even greater – not seven but seventy-seven.

At the Wellesley Village Church, where I served as Pastoral Resident before coming here, the youth group engaged regularly in the practice of forgiveness. Whenever the youth group would be on retreat for a weekend, or away for a week on a service project, at some point during that time, the group would sit down in a circle together, reflect on the time that they have shared so far, and ask for forgiveness if they felt that they had sinned, offended, hurt, done something that they shouldn't have done against one of their fellow youth group members. They would ask it directly, looking at the person whom they sought forgiveness from, and would say "Will you forgive me?" Sometimes, it would be forgiveness for things that may seem silly, "so-and-so, will you forgive me for waking you up by hitting you in the face with a pillow this morning?" and sometimes it would be a bit more serious, "so-and-so, will you forgive me for wandering off today, when I should have been with the group?" And, there are three responses that one can give in this practice of forgiveness – you can say, "yes, I forgive

you”, “no, I don’t forgive you”, or “I don’t know”. You cannot say, “don’t worry about it” or brush off the request as something not needing forgiveness – for it was ask for, we should grant it. But, what I loved, was that I never heard “no, I don’t forgive you” for whether silly or serious offenses occurred, this group knew the power of forgiveness, the power of forgiveness that we read about today – and forgiveness flowed freely.

The spiritual practice of forgiveness is one that we can all incorporate into our daily lives. And while we may not get to sit down in a circle with those whom we have spent the day and ask directly for forgiveness, for silly and serious offenses, we can forgive and ask for forgiveness. Whether we realize in the moment that something we have said may not have come out in the right way or something we have done may have offended, we can stop and ask that person for forgiveness. And, if we are approached and asked to forgive, we don’t brush off a concern that may seem to us trivial, for to the person asking, it is important. And, at the end of our day, we can look back over it, reflecting on all the day did hold, and forgive in our hearts those who sinned against us, think about whom we must ask for forgiveness if we have offended, and pray for God’s grace to cover it all.

For, as we see today in our Gospel reading, the forgiveness that we offer others connects to the forgiveness of our God. The parable in our scripture is rather interesting. It talks of a King and a slave – a slave who was clearly in charge of much of the king’s resources and had embezzled or misused these funds for he owed 10 thousand talents. Now, to give you a sense of what that means – 10 thousand talents which is the equivalent of 60 million denarii is, in other words, the day wages for 60 million day laborers. A huge sum of money he owed and, though he begged for time to pay it back, there is no way that in his lifetime, he could have earned that money back. And so the king forgave, extended grace, like the grace of God. But this slave was clearly not transformed by the powerful gift of forgiveness, for he could not turn around and forgive another, who owed much less, he could not forgive. In telling us this parable, Jesus is reminding us of the great gift of God’s grace that surrounds us with forgiveness

all the days of our lives and calls us to forgive just a freely. For if we can't extend some grace to those around us, how can we possibly truly understand, appreciate the everlasting, eternal grace of God? In other words, when we know of God's grace for us, how could we possibly not extend grace to others?

Not seven times, but seventy-seven. Have you ever wondered where these numbers may have come from, why these numbers? While no one may know for sure, Douglas R.A. Hare, author of a commentary on the book of Matthew in the Interpretation Bible Commentary series, points us back to the beginning for a possible answer. For in Genesis Chapter 4, as the world is expanding and thus is violence, a descendant of Cain, named Lamech, brags about getting revenge, being avenged, and he says not sevenfold, but seventy-seven fold. Jesus calls us down a different path, one that stands in opposition to the path of Lamech. One that does not seek revenge for wrongdoing, but offers forgiveness in the face of it. A path that does not lead to hurt but offers healing. For the path Jesus calls us on, is one of transformation. For on this path of forgiveness that we are called to freely give, we come to appreciate the grace of God in new ways. We will not be burdened by resentment and anger but freed from it, changing our lives. And, this path has the ability to counter cultures of violence in favor of those of peace. May we strive to live such a transformative life of forgiveness, as the forgiven people of God, and may this life of forgiveness, where grace is embraced and extended to others, may this life change us, those around us and even the world. So be it, and may it be so, amen.