

One of the underestimated gifts of campus ministry, in which worshipers are typically gathered from many different Christian traditions, is the presence of debts, sins and trespasses people, all in the same room, reciting the same prayer. We debts people always finish the line first—after all, we only have 9 words to say, while the sins and trespasses folk have 12, not to mention the extra three syllables those poor trespassers have to endure. But we are a gracious bunch, and so the debtors pause at the end of the line, while the sinners and trespassers catch up, trusting that though the words may be different here or there, we have all prayed essentially the same prayer: Forgive us ... as we forgive ...

Numerous theologians have called this the most unsettling petition in the Lord's prayer, not because of the apparent confusion about what to call sins, or debts, or trespasses ... but because of that little word that we apparently all agree on ... a word which suggests God's forgiveness of us be similar to our forgiveness of others.

Forgive us AS ... we forgive.

Are we so bold to ask God to forgive us AS we forgive others? Because we know us ... and we're not always a very forgiving people, are we?

There is another set of words in the prayer that we all agree on, which may offer some help here: From beginning to end, the Lord's prayer is addressed from the first person plural—forgive US as WE forgive; not forgive ME as I forgive. Jesus assumes that we live in community, and that whole communities—not just individuals—are bound together in all for which and about which we pray—all are affected by sin; all are

in need of a regular practice of confession and forgiveness. And it only in this communal context that Jesus instruction can faithfully be heeded.

In today's passage from the narrative lectionary, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to live together **as a community of faith**, giving instruction on how to respond when a member of the community sins against another.

The instructions he gives—go confront the person one on one, if that doesn't work take a few other members of the community, and so on—the instructions are means to an end. The end—the goal—is to restore the community to wholeness: “if the member listens to you, you have **regained** that one.” It is important to know that Jesus's teaching here follows immediately the parable of the lost sheep, in which the good shepherd leaves the 99 in search of the one that has gone astray. Jesus concludes that parable saying that the Father is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. And then begins our passage: *if another member of the community sins against you ... here is what to do ...*

The person who sinned—even if that person refuses to take responsibility for their actions—is not to be seen as a lost cause, but rather as the lost sheep—the one to be reconciled to the community—the object of fervent prayer and mission. One may voluntarily remove oneself from the community of disciples, but none can remove themselves from the pursuit of God's reconciling love, whose final aim, even through conflict, is shalom—the peace,

harmony, and wholeness of the people of God.

In the second part of this passage, Peter raises an interesting question in response to Jesus' insistence that even the unrepentant sinner be cared for and pursued by the community of faith. "This all sounds nice, Jesus, but is it sustainable? How long can the community go on forgiving one who continues to sin against us?"

In the Bible, the number seven is used to convey "rest, fulfillment, and restoration,"¹ so to ask, "Should I forgive as many as seven times?" is to ask, "should my forgiveness just go on and on until all is resolved?" Jesus takes it even further—"forgiveness among disciples must not only be perfect—7 times ... it must be constant—70 times 7."

If we think of sin and forgiveness only in individualist terms, then we may hear Jesus' response as careless and even harmful, placing solely upon the victims the unreasonable demand to forgive, without having asked anything of the offender.

No matter how it is read, this is a tall order; but it is imperative that we not miss the connection to the first part of the passage: these are not instructions to isolated individuals who have been victimized by another. The forgiveness that Jesus teaches is a communal process. Individual forgiveness is a gift of grace that we may receive from God; it is not something that we simply choose to do, and it is usually not something that we voluntarily withhold. Jesus' eye is on the community of faith as a whole, and so, at least this morning, ours will be as well.

As if to illustrate just how complicated this practice of forgiveness is,

the teacher tells another parable. Much like the practice it intends to explain, the parable of the unforgiving servant can appear straightforward at a glance, but upon closer inspection it is fraught with difficulties.

Most readers assume that the king in the parable is God, for instance. The story begins, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." and then goes on to speak of a king.

But as we wade deeper and deeper into Jesus' story, this king looks less and less like the God who is being revealed in this Jesus ... and we become more and more uncomfortable, until the parable finally ends with the unforgiving servant being handed over to the torturers, at which point Jesus proclaims, "thus will my father in heaven do to every one of you if you don't forgive your brother or sister in your heart."

Is it just me, or does something seem just a little bit off about this sequence of events?

1. Jesus requires constant forgiveness from the community of disciples
2. Then, to illustrate his point tells a parable in which a harsh king, in a moment of generosity, forgives a large debt.
3. The forgiven debtor then goes out and refuses to forgive a smaller debt—admittedly a disgraceful act, and one for which he is reported to the king by his fellow servants.
4. At this point, the enraged king does not practice constant forgiveness, but instead, hands the debtor over to be tortured until every cent is paid back ... so, given the size of the debt—what would be billions of

¹ Eerdman's Dictionary, "Numbers: Symbolic Numbers"

dollars today—the reader is to assume that the torture will last forever.

5. Then, to top it off, Jesus threatens the disciples with this same punishment from God if they refuse to forgive one another—apparently, even once.

Not a single person in the parable practices the constant forgiveness that Jesus has just required of us ... It's a bit “do as I say, not as I do” isn't it?

The questions pile up: Who is this moody king, and how, exactly, is he like the God whom Jesus calls father—the God whom we call father, on whom we rely for our own forgiveness?

Does Matthew just do a poor job of illustrating Jesus point about constant forgiveness, or is there something below the surface of this story that we might have to dig for a bit—something that would make sense of the story in light of Jesus' instructions to the community?

And finally, at the center of all of this, what do Jesus' instructions and parable mean for us? When, and how often, and who, and what, are we compelled by faith to forgive, and what does that forgiveness look like?

The king's forgiveness of the servant's debt, magnificent though it may be, fails to transform ... to truly set the servant free, as we assume and hope God's forgiveness would.

The king's forgiveness, despite its apparent generosity, fails to challenge the power dynamics by which some people are able to lord over others ... and so the servant goes out, free of debt ... but short on self-esteem. His self-worth has been surrendered to the demanding, then generous king.

And immediately, it becomes clear that this forgiveness-conditional-upon-groveling is not a formula for the shalom of God. The forgiven man goes out in search of a way to re-establish his forfeited self-worth, and when he finds a person who owes him something, becomes more violent for less money than the king had been. When the king finds out, he's enraged, and further forgiveness is simply not a possibility ...

So much for Jesus' lofty, utopian ideals, huh?

We know the world illustrated by Jesus' parable. Certainly, this is a caricature of the world in which we live ... the characters and the numbers are all larger than life ... but the ideas are familiar: we deal in a world of power.

A number of years back, before the Kevin Spacey found himself in need of profound forgiveness, the TV show House of Cards captured much of this country's popular political imagination. In the show, Frank Underwood, a United States senator from South Carolina, represents the pure, ruthless pursuit of power as a defining characteristic of American politics. And insightfully, in the show power is rarely gained by sheer force, but rather sneakily ... by blackmail and calculated favors. People may publicly forgive or receive forgiveness, but they never forget ... because power is always being exchanged in the kingdoms of the world.

When Jesus tells this parable, which 'may be compared to the Kingdom of Heaven,' he is not describing the kingdom of heaven, but rather its earthly alternative. The king is less like God, and more like Frank Underwood, or Herod, or Caesar, or Pharaoh ... Jesus is not illustrating forgiveness within the community of disciples, but is exposing the shallow,

calculated forgiveness of a world in pursuit of power—the world in which we live.

The terrifying end of the parable, and Jesus' threat of eternal punishment aren't about one person making one mistake ... it's not about your failing to forgive the person who offended you, but about the consequence of a community captive to the pursuit of power ... as opposed to the community in pursuit of shalom—wholeness and peace. In the end, the unforgiving servant is punished by the rules of the world in which he chooses to live. He is forgiven as he forgave... Another way had been shown possible ... he himself had experienced it ... but the temptation to power proved too great.

Friends, another way has been shown to us as well. And it is not simply to forgive a debt, or forget a sin, or ignore a trespass.

As Stan Saunders puts it, ***“Real forgiveness does not merely reverse the power dynamics, but gives up claims to power for the sake of transformed relationships, rooted in recognition of our common humanity before God.”***²

By this definition, the church must be a community of constant forgiveness. Christian communities, and therefore individual Christians within them, cannot hold over one another's heads the sins of the past, but must practice a forgiveness which recognizes that the person who hurt me is not all that different from me ... that we are equals, and equally imperfect ... but we have also been equally and infinitely forgiven by God.

Peter's skeptical retort opens the door to Jesus' complicated story 70 times 7 is not a sustainable model of forgiveness for

any individual ... **but we are not merely individuals.**

We are a community which bears one another's burdens. We go after the lost sheep. 70 times 7 is not a sustainable model of forgiveness for the powerful ... but the disciple's truest power is revealed in weakness ... as is Christ's.

Depending on which gospel you read, as Jesus displays his greatest weakness on the cross, he may or may not speak words of forgiveness to those who have sinned against him. In Matthew's account he doesn't.

But it matters not; Jesus mere presence on the cross is the ultimate display of forgiveness, with or without accompanying words ... for the cross is Christ's refusal to exercise power over those who continually sin against him, even to the end ... [not because they have earned or deserve forgiveness ... but because we cannot become the new creation of God by following the old playbooks of worldly powers ... this is not about people getting what they deserve; it is about creating the kind of world in which we want to live—the kind of world God intends for us].

The church of Jesus is a cruciform community of faith. We believe that our fullest life is revealed we give up our claims to power. Friends, we have been forgiven endlessly. Now by the power of Christ's Spirit, let us go forth together and do likewise.

² Saunders, Stanley. *Preaching Matthew*