

# “To Be Reconciled”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 10, 2019*

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 18:10-35

Over the past weeks, we have been working our way through the Gospel of Matthew and hearing the stories of, and stories about, Jesus. He has announced the kingdom of God – this new, emerging realm where the first are last and the last are first, where those who are poor and who mourn and are persecuted are regarded as blessed. Jesus has also mercifully healed the lame and the sick; he has miraculously fed thousands and walked on water; and he has ascended a mountain as his face and clothes were transformed by a dazzling white light, with the voice of God saying: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!”

In today’s first reading, we heard Jesus describe God as being like a shepherd who would leave the flock of ninety-nine sheep to search out the lost; and rejoice when that one was found. This is the type of mercy that we attribute to God: wanting, willing and able to search for and find us; whose desire to forgive and restore us has no limits. A God who thus provides us a process to forgive and be reconciled with one another, because – as Jesus assures us – “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (v. 20)

The word that is translated as “church” in that passage is *ecclesia*, which means “called out of.” It was a familiar term in Greek politics for an assembly of citizens who would come together to vote, govern, and affect change in their community. There were lots of other words that could have been chosen to describe a religious assembly of Jesus followers, but a church, an *ecclesia*, was to be a group of people who would make a difference by working together; who have been called out with a particular job to do.<sup>1</sup>

Matthew, by including this story about church members forgiving each other in his narrative of Jesus’ story, is addressing a need that seems to have emerged in his congregation, and every congregation since; namely: why does it matter that we gather together as a church to do this work if it is sometimes hard to get along? Why do we set aside time in our busy lives to be the church? Why are we here, together, with Jesus among us?

Well, it’s complicated; and it can be messy. And Jesus doesn’t pretend that it can or even should be any other way. You see, when Matthew begins this section in verse 15, our text reads: “if a member of the church sins against you,” but what Jesus really says is,

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Glass Auld, “Forgiving People”

*when a brother sins against you.* Not if, but when. Jesus does not pretend that that we will always get along; that the church in its gathering and relationships could ever be perfect.

And then, Peter, perhaps trying to figure out how long it would take us to learn to get along as Christian sisters and brothers, asks Jesus, “how many times, Lord, should I forgive someone? As many as seven times?” (v. 21) And Jesus, just to make sure that we understand that forgiveness is not just about forgetting, but about redemption and reconciliation, as well; replies, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (v. 22), or as some translators say, *seventy times seven*. Jesus throws out numbers so big that his message is clear: forgiveness can’t be quantified.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we don’t try. How many times, we wonder, is too many? For, if Peter is asking about how many times to forgive minor annoyances, then seven is a small number. How many times the seat is left up, or the cap is left off, or the shoes aren’t put away? Maybe even seventy-seven times is not too many times to overlook these things when it’s someone you encounter every day. Maybe, Paul is just one of *those* people who keep score and remember *every single time* you say or do something wrong. Surely, Jesus is telling Peter, and us, not to be like that. But if Peter is asking about real offenses, seriously hurtful acts or words, then even forgiving seven times is a lot.<sup>2</sup>

“Forgiveness,” says Gordon Atkinson, “is the healing of wounds caused by another. You choose to let go of a past wrong and no longer be hurt by it. ...It’s a gift you give yourself. You have things to do and you want to move on with your life. Forgiveness,” he continues, “is like turning your shoulders sideways to walk quickly on a crowded sidewalk.” It’s a choice.<sup>3</sup>

After Peter’s questions about forgiveness, Jesus offers a parable – a stark, confusing, and frankly awful story about the kingdom of heaven. There was a mighty ruler who planned to sell a slave – and his wife and kids – in order to pay off the slave’s debt. It’s an incredibly big debt: one talent would be about ten years of wages. This man owes ten thousand worth of ten year’s salary. It’s a debt that a slave could never repay. The slave begs for mercy and the owner erases the debt. So far, so good.

But when that same slave encounters another man who owes him a relatively minor debt, equal to a few hundred dollars, the recently-forgiven slave grabs him by the throat, demands his money, and has him hauled off to jail. Though he has received mercy, he responds with physical violence and cruel justice. While it’s true the man owes him money, his actions certainly don’t seem just in light of what has just been forgiven him.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Swanson, “A Provocation”

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Atkinson, “Forgiveness”

In the parables third and final scene, some other slaves report this behavior to the king, who acts swiftly: summoning the “wicked” slave and rebuking him for not extending mercy. The king withdraws his forgiveness, hands him over to be punished and reinstates the obligation that his entire debt be repaid.

It makes you wonder: what ever happened to never-ending forgiveness – seventy-seven, or four-hundred ninety times? This king does not behave like Jesus instructs Peter; instead, here, forgiveness is calculated, limited, and self-benefitting. The king initially forgives, but after just one failing, refuses to forgive a second time; taking back the reprieve and replacing it with punishment.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe the appropriate question is: how did a slave (who, by definition, does not even own his own body) come to owe such an astronomical amount of money to the king? How is it possible that he could create such a huge debt if the king had not enabled it to happen? What was the king thinking – was he incompetent, or just oblivious? Either way you answer that question, the king doesn’t come out looking too good. And so, maybe this isn’t a parable about forgiving more – definitely not more times, but maybe not even a greater amount – instead, it seems to offer an indictment on any system that would imagine God as the one who keeps score.

Lacking a reasonable explanation for the king’s actions, we tend to reimagine the material as the spiritual. What an imaginably large debt we must owe to God because of our sinfulness, we think; one that we could never repay. Maybe God is like this king, and unless we keep on the straight and narrow, grace received might be rescinded. But, God’s ways are not our ways; and whenever we think we really understand who God is, and that God would behave in the same way that we tend to, “we’ve probably created a god in our image, and not the other way around.”<sup>5</sup>

What was said about forgiveness earlier – about how it matters for community, and how Jesus promises to be present in the midst of our church gatherings – our *ecclesia* – points to the need for us to participate in forgiveness. For, if we can’t figure out how to forgive each other, how can we possibly receive God’s grace? Or, maybe it’s the reverse that is true: if we aren’t able to recognize the gift of forgiveness we have already received from God, we’ll never understand how to forgive someone else. If God isn’t keeping score, then why should we?

Perhaps, in this parable, the king isn’t the one who takes forgiveness back from this ungrateful slave; perhaps the slave does it all to himself; and in so doing, removes himself from the community of grace into which we had been invited and gathered. He certainly seems to have made the rejection of forgiveness his choice.

We rightfully enter Lent with thoughts about forgiveness. This week, I would invite you to think first about whether or not you are able to accept God’s forgiveness; to

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Carter from *Narrative Lectionary Resources*

<sup>5</sup> Marcia Glass Auld, “Forgiving People”

believe that whatever you have done, or left undone, you can hand it over to God. For, we profess that nothing is beyond God's ability to reconcile and redeem. There may be amends you will need to make, but nothing that we do removes us from God's desire to be in relationship with us.

Next, I would invite you to consider whose forgiveness you are seeking. Who needs a phone call from you or a conversation with you so that your relationship might be restored? What work do you need to put into a friendship or partnership that matters to you?

And finally, I invite you to consider who you need to forgive. What might be required for some relationship to be healed? We can't force people to reciprocate, but we don't have to hang on to resentment or anger. We can choose to turn our shoulders so as not to keep knocking into others. The choice is ours.

Of course, some people don't want to work at or aren't interested in reconciliation. Jesus said, "if the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (v. 17) Jennifer Barchi, writing for the *Presbyterian Outlook*, offers insight about those people who seem unable, unwilling, or uninterested in reconciling:

*I think of Jesus and how he interacted with tax collectors and Pharisees and prostitutes of his day...They were the ones whose minds and lives Jesus wanted to change – and he did it by sticking close to them, by eating with them and sharing life with them. They didn't have to cease and desist their behaviors before he would spend his time with them. He met them where they were, he was present with them, and he heard them.*

As the church, the people of God who gather together because we have things to do, we sometimes need to give and receive forgiveness. Jesus knew this; and he knew that it would not always be easy. But, when we stick together; when we share in life with each other, not counting the number of times we sin against each other, we participate in the very grace that has saved us. Forgiven people can become forgiving people. It is our choice to make.

During this season of Lent, how might relationships be restored and redeemed in your church, your community, your family and your life? How can we participate together in the ministry of reconciliation? Can we be a gathered people that works at what God intends us to do, at what Jesus offers us instructions regarding how to do it: forgiving others so as to live out a greater expression of what God intends for us to become. If God has forgiven us, how many times can we forgive? Amen.