

Matthew 18: 21 - 35

GOD OF FREEDOM, YOUR FORGIVENESS TRANSCENDS WHATEVER WRONG EXISTS BETWEEN US. GRANT US THE COURAGE TO FORGIVE OTHERS, AND TO PRACTICE RECONCILIATION BY THE KINDNESS OF OUR SPEAKING, THE SHARING OF OUR RESOURCES, AND THE HONORING OF YOUR DESIRE FOR GOOD AMEN.

THIS PARABLE OF THE WICKED SERVANT IS A PRICKLY ONE. IT ENDS THE SECTION OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL IN WHICH JESUS TALKS AT LENGTH ABOUT WHAT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ARE LIKE, A SECTION IN WHICH HE MAKES THE SAME POINT OVER AND OVER AGAIN: THAT THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY..THE FAMILY OF GOD...IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD, AND THAT THOSE WHO WANT TO BE MEMBERS OF IT ARE CALLED TO DO EVERYTHING IN THEIR POWER TO NOURISH AND STRENGTHEN THE BONDS OF THEIR LOVE.

LISTENING TO JESUS TALK ON THIS MATTER, PETER BECOMES CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT, EXACTLY, IS REQUIRED. WHAT ARE THE RULES? HOW FAR DOES HE HAVE TO GO WITH THIS RELATIONSHIP STUFF? "LORD," HE ASKS JESUS, "HOW OFTEN SHALL MY BROTHER SIN AGAINST ME, AND I FORGIVE HIM? AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES?" HE ASKS, NO DOUBT ASSUMING THAT SEVEN IS A LOT OF TIMES, MORE TIMES THAN MOST PEOPLE CAN FORGIVE ANYONE.

"I DO NOT SAY TO YOU SEVEN TIMES," JESUS REPLIES, "BUT SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN," WHICH IS ABOUT THE SAME AS SAYING THAT THERE IS NO LIMIT TO FORGIVENESS, THAT FORGIVING THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US IS NOT SOMETHING WE EVER GET DONE BUT SOMETHING THAT GOES ON FOREVER, THAT IT IS NOT A FAVOR WE GIVE OUT SEVEN TIMES AND WITHHOLD THE EIGHTH, BUT A WAY OF LIFE THAT NEVER ENDS.

THINK ABOUT THAT. THAT CAN REALLY WEAR YOU OUT. FORGIVING SOMEONE ONCE CAN BE HARD ENOUGH. SUPPOSE YOU HAVE A LUNCH DATE WITH A FRIEND THAT YOU GO TO A LOT OF TROUBLE TO KEEP. YOU LEAVE EARLY ENOUGH SO THAT YOU WILL BE THERE ON TIME, AND EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVE TO CIRCLE THE BLOCK FIVE TIMES TO FIND A PARKING SPOT, YOU MAKE IT, CHOOSING A NICE TABLE NEAR THE WINDOW AND SETTLING DOWN TO WAIT, AND WAIT, AND WAIT, UNTIL IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT YOU HAVE BEEN STOOD UP, AND YOU PAY YOUR CHECK AND LEAVE, TELLING YOURSELF YOUR FRIEND HAD BETTER HAVE A GOOD EXCUSE.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON SHE CALLS, SAYING HOW AWFUL SHE FEELS, THAT SHE LEFT HER PLANNER AT HOME AND DID NOT REMEMBER UNTIL JUST THAT MINUTE THAT THE TWO OF YOU HAD A LUNCH DATE. SHE IS SO SORRY AND WOULD LIKE A RAINCHECK. SO YOU SET ANOTHER DATE, AND THE DAY ARRIVES AND THE WHOLE THING HAPPENS ALL OVER AGAIN.

FORGIVING SOMEONE ONCE IS ONE THING, BUT ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO SET ANOTHER LUNCH DATE? ARE YOU REALLY WILLING TO GO THROUGH THIS ROUTINE SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN, OR MORE SPECIFICALLY, FOUR HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-EIGHT MORE TIMES?

NOT LIKELY. HUMAN NATURE DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY. MOST OF US ARE WILLING TO GET BURNED ONCE, SEVERAL OF US EVEN TWICE, BUT THE THIRD TIME WE TEND TO BACK OFF.

FORGIVENESS IS IN OUR VOCABULARY: IN CHURCH WE SAY IT OFTEN. OUR FREQUENT USE OF THE VOCABULARY OF FORGIVENESS SHOULD NOT DULL OUR CONSCIENCE TO THE FACT OF ITS IMPORTANCE, ITS ABSOLUTE IRREPLACEABLE IMPORTANCE TO ALL OF US. WE CANNOT HAVE FRIENDS WITHOUT FORGIVENESS, WE CANNOT HAVE FAMILY WITHOUT FORGIVENESS, WE CANNOT HAVE LASTING MARRIAGES WITHOUT FORGIVENESS. BUT IT IS DIFFICULT, VERY DIFFICULT. IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO TURN LOOSE PAIN, ESPECIALLY IF THE PAIN HAS BECOME THE NEW CENTER OF OUR IDENTITY; THE NEW DEFINITION OF WHO WE ARE...THE WRONGED, HURT PERSON. WHY IS FORGIVENESS SO DIFFICULT?

FRED CRADDOCK TELLS A SIMPLE BUT WONDERFUL STORY OF A SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY WHOSE MOTHER ASKED HIM TO STOP RUNNING THROUGH THE HOUSE BECAUSE HE MIGHT STUMBLE AND FALL AND HURT HIMSELF OR BREAK SOMETHING. SO, OF COURSE, HE RAN AND STUMBLED AND FELL AND BROKE A VASE. HIS FATHER SAW IT HAPPEN, PICKED HIM UP, DUSTED HIM OFF, AND SAID, "DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. IT'S JUST A VASE." HIS MOTHER, HOWEVER, KNELT DOWN AND GATHERED UP THE SHATTERED PIECES AND SAID SOFTLY, "IT WASN'T JUST A VASE. IT WAS MY FAVORITE VASE. MY MOTHER GAVE IT TO ME, HER MOTHER GAVE IT TO HER, AND I LOOKED FORWARD TO GIVING IT TO YOU." AND SHE WEPT, AND THE LITTLE BOY WEPT, AND THE MOTHER TOOK HIM IN HER ARMS AND HUGGED HIM TIGHTLY AND HE HUGGED HER BACK. "WHO FORGAVE HERE, THE FATHER OR THE MOTHER?" CRADDOCK ASKED.

FORGIVENESS CONFRONTS THE REALITY OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED BUT DECIDES TO BREAK A CYCLE OF VENGEANCE, DECIDES TO BE FREE OF IT.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT DENYING OUR HURT. WHEN WE MINIMIZE WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO US, GLOSS OVER IT, TELL OURSELVES THAT IT WAS NOT REALLY THAT BAD, WE CANNOT REALLY FORGIVE. TO FORGIVE IS TO MAKE A CONSCIOUS CHOICE TO RELEASE THE PERSON WHO HAS WOUNDED US FROM THE SENTENCE OF OUR JUDGEMENT, HOWEVER JUSTIFIED THAT JUDGEMENT MAY BE.

A PASTOR TELLS OF A SINGLE MOTHER, DIVORCED, WORKING TO SUPPORT HERSELF AND THREE YOUNG CHILDREN WHO CAME TO SEE HIM ONE DAY. SHE TOLD THE PASTOR: "SINCE MY HUSBAND WALKED OUT ON US, EVERY MONTH IS A STRUGGLE TO PAY OUR BILLS. I HAVE TO TELL MY KIDS WE HAVE NO MONEY TO THE MOVIES, WHILE HE'S LIVING IT UP WITH

HIS NEW GIRLFRIEND IN ANOTHER TOWN. HOW CAN YOU TELL ME TO FORGIVE HIM?" THE PASTOR ANSWERED: "I'M NOT ASKING YOU TO FORGIVE HIM BECAUSE WHAT HE DID WAS ACCEPTABLE. IT WASN'T; IT WAS MEAN AND SELFISH. I'M ASKING YOU TO FORGIVE BECAUSE HE DOESN'T DESERVE THE POWER TO LIVE IN YOUR HEAD AND TURN YOU INTO A BITTER ANGRY PERSON. I'D LIKE TO SEE HIM OUT OF YOUR LIFE EMOTIONALLY AS COMPLETELY AS HE IS OUT OF IT PHYSICALLY, BUT YOU KEEP HOLDING ON TO HIM. YOU'RE NOT HURTING HIM BY HOLDING ON TO THAT RESENTMENT, BUT YOU'RE HURTING YOURSELF.

FORGIVENESS DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN RECONCILIATION.

IN OUR GOSPEL READING TODAY HE TELLS A VIVID STORY ABOUT A SERVANT WHO OWED THE KING A GREAT DEAL OF MONEY AND WAS FORGIVEN. BUT WHEN THAT SAME SERVANT ENCOUNTERS ANOTHER WHO OWES HIM MONEY, HE REFUSES HIM FORGIVENESS, GRABS HIM BY THE THROAT, AND DEMANDS REPAYMENT. WHEN THE KING HEARS ABOUT IT, HE BECOMES VERY ANGRY, REVERSES HIS DECISION TO FORGIVE, AND PUTS THE FIRST SERVANT IN JAIL UNTIL HE PAYS, WHICH, GIVEN THE AMOUNT HE OWES, MEANS FOREVER.

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT HAS NOT ONLY MISSED THE POINT; HE IS IN THE PROCESS OF MISSING THE REST OF HIS LIFE. HE HAS NOT ACCEPTED AND EMBRACED HIS OWN FORGIVENESS BY PUTTING IT TO WORK IN HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS.

IF I AM ABLE TO FORGIVE AT ALL, IT IS BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. FORGIVEN BY JESUS CHRIST THROUGH HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS. FORGIVEN BY OTHERS. WHEN FORGIVENESS HAS HAPPENED TO ME, IT IS LIKE SOMEONE HAS TAKEN A BIG PINK ERASER AND SCRUBBED MY RECORD CLEAN. IT IS AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE TO BE FORGIVEN ISN'T IT? BUT IT IS NEVER ONE OF OUR OWN DOING.

BY THE END OF THE PARABLE, PETER THINKS HE HAS GOTTEN THE MESSAGE: DO UNTO OTHERS OR THE KING WILL DO UNTO YOU...BUT THAT IS NOT THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE IS: DO UNTO OTHERS AS THE KING HAS *ALREADY* DONE UNTO YOU. IT IS NOT A MATTER OF EARNING YOUR FORGIVENESS, OR LETTING OTHERS OFF THE HOOK SO THAT YOU WILL BE LET OFF THE HOOK SOMEDAY.

IT IS A MATTER OF UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU HAVE *ALREADY* BEEN FORGIVEN, THAT SOMEONE TO WHOM YOU OWE EVERYTHING—YOUR VERY LIFE AND BREATH; SOMEONE WHO HAS GIVEN AND GIVEN AND GIVEN TO YOU AND WHO HAS GOTTEN PRECIOUS LITTLE IN RETURN EXAMINED YOUR ENORMOUS DEBT IN GREAT DETAIL AND KNOWS FROM YOUR CREDIT RATING THAT THE CHANCES OF REPAYMENT ARE NIL. SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ALL OF THAT HAS TAKEN THE STACK OF IOUs AND TORN THEM IN TWO, BALANCING THE BOOKS IN ONE FELL SWOOP FOR ONE REASON AND ONE REASON ALONE: BECAUSE THAT SOMEONE

WANTS TO REMAIN IN RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU, AND WANTS YOU TO BE FREE TO RESPOND. BECAUSE THAT SOMEONE...JESUS CHRIST...LOVES YOU.

THE MOVIE *AMAZING GRACE* IS ABOUT THE STORY OF WILLIAM WILBERFORCE AND THE END OF THE SLAVE TRADE IN GREAT BRITAIN, A VERY PROFITABLE ENTERPRISE. WILBERFORCE'S MENTOR AND INSPIRATION IS AN OLD MAN BY THE NAME OF JOHN NEWTON, A FORMER SLAVE TRADER, CAPTAIN OF A SLAVE SHIP, WHO BECAME CONVINCED THAT WHAT HE WAS DOING WAS WRONG, TERRIBLY WRONG; A SIN AGAINST GOD. NEWTON'S CONVERSION LED HIM TO TURN AROUND, TO GET OUT OF THE SLAVE BUSINESS, AND TO SPEND THE REST OF HIS DAYS DOING HUMBLE TASKS, CLEANING FLOORS IN THE CHURCH, AS PENANCE, ALWAYS HAUNTED BY HIS GUILT. WILBERFORCE HAD KNOWN HIM FOR A LONG TIME AND IS INSPIRED TO MOUNT AN EFFORT IN PARLIAMENT TO END THE SLAVE TRADE. NEWTON ENCOURAGES HIM TO CONTINUE THE FIGHT, BUT OLD, FRAIL, HE STILL LONGS TO KNOW GOD'S FORGIVENESS, THAT HE'S ALL RIGHT WITH GOD, THAT GOD'S GRACE IS FOR HIM IN SPITE OF WHAT HE DID YEARS AGO. IT'S NOT CLEAR IN THE MOVIE WHETHER HE EVER UNDERSTANDS GOD'S FORGIVENESS, BUT HE MUST HAVE, BECAUSE HE'S THE ONE, FORMER SLAVE TRADER JOHN NEWTON WHO WROTE, "AMAZING GRACE, HOW SWEET THE SOUND, THAT SAVE A WRETCH LIKE ME! I ONCE WAS LOST BUT NOW AM FOUND, WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE."

WHEN THEY NAILED JESUS TO THE CROSS AND LEFT HIM HANGING THERE, HIS STRENGTH FADING, THE LIFE LITERALLY BLEEDING OUT OF HIM, LOOKING DOWN, WATCHING AS HIS FRIENDS RAN AWAY AND THE AUTHORITIES MOCKED AND TAUNTED, AS SOLDIERS THREW DICE FOR WHAT WAS LEFT OF HIS GARMENTS, HE SPOKE. SEVEN TIMES, THE BIBLE SAYS. HE DID NOT SAY, "YOU WILL GET YOURS ONE DAY." OR "YOU'LL BE SORRY." HE DID NOT CURSE. HE DID NOT SAY, GOD WILL DAMN YOU FOR THIS." THOSE WHO WERE THERE HEARD HIM SAY, SIMPLY, "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM." AMEN.