

Sermon on Matthew 18:21-35

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. My Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Could everyone please close their eyes.

Love, kindness, mercy, grace, forgiveness.

Now, keeping your eyes closed, take a slow, deep breath in and out.

Bitterness, anger, resentment, evil, unforgiveness.

Take another slow, deep breath in and out and open your eyes.

Words can be powerful. They can create deep within us, feelings that can cause pure joy and, feelings of pure evil. What feelings did you experience when you heard the words I spoke while you had your eyes closed. You may have felt joy, happiness, sadness, anger, or you may have felt nothing. Whoever first said that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me was wrong. Bones heal. Emotional wounds sometimes do not.

Jesus' decision to use oral parables to teach his disciples was no accident. He carefully selected dramatic and often hyperbolic characters, words and stories specifically to get his point across. Sometimes the point is missed, especially by Peter and of course us, and the similarity between us and Peter is that he hadn't

yet fully understood what it meant to have complete faith in God. Like Peter, many of us, want to have that kind of faith but everyday continue to act in ways that a person who had an unwavering faith in God wouldn't.

This parable from Jesus is specifically teaching Peter, and us, that we are forgiven, and that because we are forgiven, we can forgive, but we need to fully believe in God's forgiveness of us.

At the beginning of today's Gospel, Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" It's in these moments in the Gospels that I think that Peter must have been the one who first created the forehead slap or the 'I can't believe I said that' head shake.

When Peter asked this question about how many times he should forgive someone, he was thinking that 7 was a huge number. That this answer would be favourable to Jesus and put him in good stead. That forgiving someone 7 times was offering more forgiveness than anyone should ever get. And his reason for thinking this can be explained because under the current Jewish law, a person was lawfully entitled to be forgiven 3 times and, on the 4th, the forgiver was entitled to 'not forgive' them, and essentially cut them out of their life. So, forgiving another person 7 times was, to Peter, an amazing and exorbitant number. Boy was he wrong.

Jesus, answers Peter (probably with a deep sigh first), 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

And in other translations, 70 times 7. But the specific numbers are irrelevant. Jesus' point is that forgiveness should be infinite. That you can't put a limit on the number of times you forgive someone because God's forgiveness of us is infinite, it's limitless. If we believe in God's never-ending and unconditional forgiveness of us, we need to 'pay it forward' so to speak. Much easier said than done, I know.

As mentioned, this parable Jesus tells loosely uses numbers to make his point and it's at this point where we can see that Jesus, being fully human, had a fabulous sense of humour. The numbers are important and make sense in the wider sense of the parable, but we don't need to get caught up in them as you'll see.

Jesus says, a king wished to settle accounts with his slaves. Right at the beginning of the reckoning a servant who owed the king 10,000 talents was brought before him. Here Jesus uses hyperbole, sarcasm even, to try and explain the kingdom of heaven to Peter. In our language, Jesus was taking the mickey out of Peter and having a laugh because 10,000 talents was an amount of money that was utterly unachievable for a person to ever earn in a lifetime let alone pay back in one. 1 talent is equal to 15 years wages so 10,000 would take a person more than 150,000 years to repay.

And how did the servant incur this kind of debt in the first place? Some say that he was a tax collector for the king

and somehow lost all the money he'd collected. That idea leaves me with even more questions.

The king goes on to say that to repay the debt, the servant, his wife and his children will be sold, along with all of their possessions. The servant begs and pleads with the king who takes pity on him and wipes his debt clean. Again, Jesus has got to be kidding right? What person, let alone a king, would wipe clean a debt of around forty million dollars. Regardless, he does, and the servant is released from his debt and the king continues the reckoning.

I wonder at this point, how the servant might be feeling. I would imagine, if I were him, I'd be feeling elated, ecstatic. The forty-million-dollar debt that I had been worrying about and losing sleep over, had just been lifted from me and I also get to stay in relative freedom with my family. I would want to celebrate and at least shout all of my friends and family a few drinks down at the local tavern. But we know, this is not what followed.

After the forgiven servant left the king he ran into another servant who owed him 100 denarii. To put this into context, 100 denarii is about one day's wage, so repayment of this debt was highly achievable (another piece of humour from Jesus). The forgiven servant demanded what he was owed to be repaid even going so far as to choke out the debtor. Some might say that this physical abuse was over-the-top and unnecessary, but I guess, given the story Jesus has told so far, the hyperbole

fits. The servant who owed the debt begged and pleaded for patience in exactly the same way the forgiven servant had with the king but here the parable takes a turn. Instead of 'paying it forward' the debtor was denied any forgiveness or mercy and was thrown into prison until the debt was repaid.

Those who witnessed this event were shocked and greatly distressed so ran back to report the incident to the king.

The king was outraged and called for the forgiven servant to be returned to him. The king says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you? It's a fair question although we don't get an answer from the servant who is then thrown into prison but not only has serve time to repay the original debt but will also be tortured. This is the one part of the parable that I am yet to get my head around. If the king in the parable is to represent God and God's forgiveness, then wouldn't the servant again be forgiven? For me, I think that although God's forgiveness is unconditional and infinite, God is also just. Forgiveness can be given but consequences for sin also need to be given otherwise sin would be a free-for-all and a society without any boundaries would be unimaginably damaged and broken.

So, we've heard the drama, the humour, and the outrageous over exaggeration from Jesus this morning

but the most important teaching is in the last line of this Gospel passage. Jesus says, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

On the surface it seems that Jesus is saying that if we don't forgive honestly from our hearts God will throw us into prison to live a life of torture. Of course, as usual, Jesus doesn't simply mean what he says. For me, Jesus is saying that being unwilling to forgive, firstly means that there is an unbelief or lack of faith in the unconditional, infinite forgiveness of God, and secondly, that if we don't or can't forgive, the subsequent resentment and anger will torture us.

I heard someone on a podcast recently say that resentment and anger held by someone who is unable to forgive is like drinking a glass of poison and waiting for the other person to die. In other words, those who can't forgive from the heart, rot away on the inside from the evil and anger caused by resentment. Remember your emotional response to the words I gave you at the beginning of this sermon. That's just the tip of the iceberg.

If we look back in this Gospel to chapter 6, we hear Jesus teaching us how to pray The Lord's Prayer. He says, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” This, my friends, is the reason for today's parable. Peter had heard this statement already but did not quite yet have the faith firm enough to believe it and

in typical Jesus' fashion, he has to explain it further to Peter, and from an angle that Peter might better understand. Isn't Peter great?

Some of you may or may not have given some thought to the fact that Jesus in Mathew 6 and in this parable uses the word 'debts' rather than 'sins' so could he not be simply talking about financial debts throughout this passage? It's a fair point. The reason we understand that this not the case is due to the original Greek text of this parable and of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6. The Greek word *opheile* and sometimes *Opheiletēs*, is used in both and is translated as 'debt' or debt owing. Furthermore, Peter's use of the word sin rather than debt right at the beginning of the parable when asking how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him, is a dead giveaway that Jesus is explaining the debt of sin through the debt of money. Confused? It's all Greek to me as well.

What I take away from this parable is that:

- just like the servant and the king, we can never repay the debt we owe to God for sacrificing God's one and only son for the forgiveness of our sins. Our debt is enormous, but God has wiped it clean.
- forgiveness is possible because we have been forgiven. Because this vast and staggering debt against us has been wiped clean by the grace of God, we have the capability of forgiving ourselves and others.

- Not forgiving from our hearts harbours resentment, bitterness and anger which only poisons us. It is torture.
- Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting or that there is no justice needing to be served.
- And lastly, we need to keep coming back to Jesus and ask him to help us forgive. Jesus wants us to ask him to free us of this burden, this pain. Jesus is with us, and he will answer our prayers!

And as we follow the teachings of Jesus to forgive others as we have been forgiven, we release the power of God's love and forgiveness into a world in deep need of healing. Forgiveness heals us and it heals others. Amen.