

## “On Leaving Grudgement for Grace”

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Scriptures:

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:8-13 Matthew 18:21-35

On a scale of 1 to 10, how good are you at holding a grudge? All of us have some practice of that persistent feeling of ill will or resentment that results from some past insult or injury, but some are more accomplished than others in holding a grudge.

Maybe it's not easy to give yourself a ranking without some consideration, some examination of the past. If you're on the higher end of the grudge scale — your feelings of resentment, your memory of the wrongs done to you, the bitter taste in your mouth, the coldness of your glare and the clenching of your jaw — if you are good at holding a grudge these all flood you in the instant you think of the person who harmed you or the situation where you were wronged. They are true feelings and automatic, natural responses. Human.

Most of us don't want to admit we have a high score here, because we know that living in grudgement — that state or practice of holding resentments, remembering the wrongs that have been done to you — we know that grudgement isn't good. By the way, that's a word I've made up.

Everyone knows that Christians are to forgive. We pray it all the time, it's all through the scriptures we honor; forgiveness is the main message Jesus shared that transformed people's lives. We know, “to err is human, to forgive, divine.” We say we follow Jesus, we want to love God and love and serve our neighbors, so it's hard to admit that we are accomplished grudge holders, that a sour taste stays in our mouths and forgiveness is not easily granted for the injuries we have suffered.

Today's readings all encourage us to leave grudgement behind and enter into a new state of grace.

The saga that ends the book of Genesis is all about Joseph and his brothers. If anyone has the right to a grudge, it is Joseph. Go back and read from Genesis 37 on, recalling how Jacob loved his son Joseph the best, causing envy among his older brothers — and how Joseph's dreams irritated them, as if he were so superior to them. Recall how they profited from their bitterness, selling him into slavery. The woes continue for Joseph, all because of his brothers' prior bad acts, yet once he is in their presence, once he has the power to destroy them or rescue them from famine, he chooses to rescue them. And here is our passage today, from Genesis 50, verses 15 to 21. The brothers know he could remain in grudgement, and they ask his forgiveness. Now Joseph chooses to remember the past differently, through the lens of God's providence. With tears in his eyes, he says to his brothers, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”

To err is human, to forgive, divine.

It's not that Joseph forgets all that happened. To forgive is not to forget, but to remember it all and then make a choice for mercy, which is the energy of God's love, full of compassion, slow to anger, and of great kindness, as Psalm 103 sings. Joseph chooses to see beyond his own suffering, his rightful resentment, and to imagine that God can use for good what another intended as harm. He chooses to release the grudge. He chooses to forgive and so creates a path forward, a new relationship with his family, and one that fulfills the destiny of his dreams.

Forgiveness is the will to change one's relationship with the past, with those who have wronged you, those who have broken their own humanity and injured you in the breaking; forgiveness creates new life. Forgiveness is a choice that creates new life.

Peter's question to Jesus is not whether to forgive but how often one must forgive. The translation of his question in Matthew, chapter 18 verse 21 is misleading. To broaden the inclusivity of the text, the New Revised Standard Version replaces the Greek word for "brother" with the phrase, "a member of the church." Peter is asking how often he has to be like Joseph – how often he's required to forgive the members of his family, those who are closest to him. He wants to know the rules, the limits of forgiveness. Seven times must have felt generous to Peter, and you can keep track of seven. But you can't easily remember seventy-seven. In other words, forgiveness is a choice without limits. Remember, our mistakes are human, and forgiveness divine.

The parable Jesus tells illustrates the wideness of God's mercy. We are not so familiar with ancient monetary measures. A talent was worth more than fifteen years wages for a laborer, a denarius was a day's wages. So the debt owed to the master was about 60 million denarii, compared with the neighbor's debt of 100. God chooses to forgive us immensely, in order to build a new creation not bound by grievances and resentments for wrong-doing. Justice would equalize the scales; mercy throws the scales away.

But the parable also demonstrates that all who receive the grace of forgiveness do not fully receive it, do not allow that divine mercy to transform into human mercy. The slave who is released from a massive debt has no gratitude for such generosity, and no mercy touching his heart. He demands justice – to be paid back for what he has lent, and he extracts it with swift judgement. When the master learns of this, he follows suit. I stumble on the last words of Jesus here – his commentary on the parable. He says, "so my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Is divine forgiveness conditional? Does it depend on my being willing and able to forgive? I think the answer to that question is yes, and no.

No, God's forgiveness is the action of grace, of mercy – the qualities of love that is given, a gift, not a commodity to be bought or sold or bartered for. God's forgiveness does not depend on human agency – God can and will act out of God's being.

God loves because God is God. God forgives, because God's will is to change the past relationship with this sinful and broken world, so that unity overcomes estrangement, forgiveness heals guilt, and joy conquers despair. Forgiveness is God's choice that creates new life, a new humanity, a new and beloved community in Christ Jesus. God's choice is not dependent on our willingness to act, so no, divine forgiveness is not conditional.

But yes, Jesus is right. When we are forgiven it transforms the heart and fills it with mercy, with that divine gift of grace. We cannot receive grace and then stay in grudge with those who have wronged us. God's choice of forgiveness gives us new life, the release from all our past sins and offenses. How then can we walk in newness of life, if we are still holding fast to the grudges against those who have wronged us? Isn't that truly the prison that holds us from the fullness and freedom of grace?

I want to repeat two stories shared by Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker<sup>1</sup> to illustrate forgiveness, the will and choice to leave grudge and enter into the grace that is new life in Christ. One is of Carrie

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<sup>1</sup> "Forgiveness Is at the Core" September 6, 2020; Katherine M. Schifferdecker @ [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

ten Boom, a Dutch Christian woman who was imprisoned in the Ravensbruck concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home. Corrie's sister died at that camp, and she suffered there, but after the war, she traveled around Europe, preaching the Christian gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she writes of an encounter with a former guard from Ravensbruck whom she recognized at a talk she gave at a German church in 1947. He came up to her afterwards, told her that he had become a Christian, that he knew God had forgiven him, but he wanted to ask for her forgiveness. He held out his hand but she felt nothing but anger for him.

She wrote, "And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

Grudgement is easy and forgiveness is hard, really hard. But Corrie's story illustrates that where God calls, God also equips. The grace given Corrie allowed that transformation in her and in her former guard. They both found the new life of grace.

The last story is more recent. If anyone would be allowed to hold a grudge, to resent someone for an injury, it would be Brandt Jean. His brother Botham Jean was killed by Amber Guyger in his own apartment in Dallas, Texas, which she entered, thinking it was her own. Amber, a white police officer, shot and killed a defenseless Botham Jean. We would understand it if Brandt held a grudge against her, if he broadcast that grudge and expanded it to include all law enforcement officers. But at her sentencing hearing, Brandt took the stand and spoke from the grace that transformed his heart and gave him courage and boldness in the new life of his Christian faith. Brandt forgave Amber and expressed his hope that she would accept Christ in her heart. You can watch his testimony on YouTube<sup>2</sup>. You can watch as the grace flows through Brandt, as he asks permission to give his brother's killer a hug. And you can listen as you hear the tears flowing through the courtroom, as Brandt embraces Amber. When the tears come to your eyes, you know you, too, are being touched by the grace of God at work in Brandt. That's an indication you may score lower on the grudge scale. That the transforming gift of God's mercy is at work in your heart.

In our worship we will confess our sins and ask God for mercy. We will pray the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Remember Joseph.

Remember Corrie.

Remember Brandt.

Remember that forgiveness is the will to change one's relationship with the past, with those who have wronged you, those who have broken their own humanity and injured you in the breaking. Forgiveness is a choice that invites others into the new life of grace that we have received when God mercifully forgives us.

Remember and live.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://youtu.be/oxOdgWGEDO>

