

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 19A
Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 50:15-21

Trinity Episcopal Church
Santa Barbara, CA
September 13, 2026

*O Gracious One, your Word is a lamp to our feet
 and a light to our path. Amen.*

I have a question for you.

Who here has had trouble with forgiveness?
 Trouble knowing how to do it?
 Trouble believing it's necessary?
 Trouble bringing yourself to do it?

I'm guessing that pretty much all of us have struggled,
 at one time or another.

Because every one of us has been wounded.
 Every one of us has endured suffering that we did not deserve.
 Every one of us has had to try to heal
 from the pain of those experiences.
 Every one of us has had to figure out how to deal
 with the ones who've wronged us.

So how about you and I take maybe 10 seconds,
 and bring to mind someone we've struggled to forgive.

And, let's be gentle with ourselves,
 and choose a person we feel okay thinking about
 as we explore (talk about) forgiveness this morning.
 10 seconds – I'm watching the time:

Let's set that situation over there, for now...

And begin, by clarifying what forgiveness is *not*.

It is not about saying whatever happened is no big deal.
 It is not about forgetting it, or burying it.
 It is not about pretending we have not been hurt.
 It is not about *not* naming, and condemning, wrongdoing.
 What was done to us.

What forgiveness *is* about
 is releasing the one who has offended us
 from our judgment of them,
 our insistence that they get what we think they deserve,
 and our desire to retaliate.

And forgiveness is also about *releasing ourselves*
 from the negative physical and emotional effects
 of holding on to our hurt, resentment, and bitterness.

And now that we are clear on that,
 let's turn to this exchange between Peter and Jesus
 that we heard in the passage John just read from Matthew's Gospel.

It comes at the end of a chapter-long section about life in community
 that began with Jesus talking about
 the preciousness of every single member,
 and telling the parable of a shepherd who leaves 99 of his sheep
 to search for the one who is lost;
 and then continued with Jesus explaining
 how conflicts are to be resolved
 when one member of the community
 has been offended by another:

First you go to person who has wronged you
 and talk to them about it;
 if they don't listen, you go back a second time
 with one or two others;
 if that doesn't work, you involve the whole community.
 And if even *that* fails to bring reconciliation
you release that person from your expectations
 ("let them be to you as a Gentile or tax collector", Jesus says).

And now Peter is wondering,
 "how often do I have to do this – seven times?"

Why seven?
 Well, in biblical tradition, seven is the perfect number.
 Seven signifies completeness and finished work.

So Peter is basically asking “how much is enough?
When do I get to be done with forgiveness?”

And Jesus replies “not seven but seventy-seven times”!
In other words, “Peter, you are *never* going to be done with forgiveness!
Forgiveness is an absolute that knows no limit.
In the reign of God, there is always more.”

Then Jesus launches into a story.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king...”
which is code for “here comes a parable...”
and according to New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine,
Jesus’ parables are designed to disturb, challenge and provoke us,
and *invite us into new ways of seeing*.

And so it does. Let me recap:

A king is settling accounts with his slaves.
And one of them owes him 10,000 talents.
10,000 talents is an *absurd* amount of money.
A talent was roughly equivalent to 15 years’ wages for a manual laborer.
10,000 times *that*.
150,000 years’ labor, at, say, \$20,000 a year -- that’s *\$3 billion dollars*.

That such debt could be covered by the sale
of the slave’s wife, children and property is *also absurd*.
As is the now-prostrate slave’s promise that given time, he will pay it all back.

The king takes pity,
and decides to forgive this ridiculous debt. Just wipe it out.

BUT THEN the slave goes out and calls in a debt of his own.
A more modest, though not insignificant, sum of 100 denarii
owed him by a fellow slave.
He grabs *his* debtor by the throat, ignores his plea for more time,
and has him thrown into prison.

Of course, word of this gets back to the king,
who in fury turns the slave over to be tortured
until he pays his entire debt – *his entire \$3 billion dollar-equivalent-ish debt*.

“So my heavenly father will do to every one of you”
 Jesus warns his listeners – “if you do you forgive from your heart.”

How’s that for disturbing, challenging and provocative?

I’m going to suggest
 that instead of trying to make sense of this arguably nonsensical story
 how about you and I take a step back
 and consider/wonder what the parable might be inviting us to see differently.

Starting with that ridiculously large debt. The 10,000 talents.
 The point of its absurdity may be
 that there are some situations where what is owed,
 what needs to be forgiven,
 is so huge that *there is no way to repay it*.

This grace we have all received from a loving, compassionate, forgiving creator
 who is ever working to heal our brokenness and bring life out of death,
 to this holy God we owe an incalculable debt that can never be repaid.
 The debt of our very lives.

But also, for those among us who have suffered unspeakable harm
 at the hands of others are owed debts that can never, ever be repaid.
 For victims of abuse. And wars. And terrorist attacks. And hate crimes. And, and...
 there is *no way* to balance the scales.

The choice before you and me, and them,
 may be the same as the one before the king –
 That choice of whether to forgive, and release our debtors, or not.

The king chooses to release the slave.
 But then, what the slave does next is *mind-boggling*.
 He doesn’t seem to understand
 that when you have received great mercy,
 you might want to extend at least some of same
 to another who owes you so much less!

How might we see him differently?
 Maybe he was drowning in shame
 and projecting his self-hatred onto his fellow slave.

Maybe he was afraid the king was going to change his mind,
and then where would he be?
Maybe he was just a horrible person.

Whatever the slave's motivations
the king's forgiveness didn't have the positive effect he had every right to expect.
It did not make his slave more gracious.

Yours and my forgiveness may not make those who have wronged us better either.
If we are forgiving in hopes of changing other peoples' behavior,
we aren't really letting go.
Any 12-step program will tell you that.

And yet, our choice to forgive or not *does* impact those around us.
Witness the distress of the slave's fellows
upon witnessing his violent and merciless behavior,
and their seeming advocacy on his victim's behalf in response.
Which opens up another area for seeing differently.

We tend to think what we do about forgiveness
is just between us and those who offend us.
But in fact, yours and my ability to forgive can have a communal impact.
Forgiveness practiced may provoke more forgiveness.
I was living in central PA at the time of the Nickel Mines shooting
20 years ago this past April.
After a gunman killed six Amish schoolgirls, the world watched, transfixed,
as their community reached out to his family with forgiveness.
For a short while, there was a public dialogue about the power of their choice
as the effect of that community's commitment rippled out.

And finally – about that sobering ending of the story.
The King's punishing anger, and Jesus' warning.
Some scholars believe that the parable originally ended
with the King asking "should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had
mercy on you?"
And that what follows –
the king turning the slave over to be tortured until he can pay
and Jesus warning that our heavenly father will do the same to us –
is a Matthean addition.

But we can't know that. We have what we have.

A different way of seeing, though,
may be to understand Matthew's ending
to be *descriptive* rather than prescriptive.

What I mean is,
might refusing to even try to release our offenders from our judgment,
instead holding them captive in their debt to us
and thereby feeding the hurt and anger that were *natural* responses to injury –
might that not lead to *torturous* consequences down the road?

Don't you and I know people
whose inability to let go of wrongs suffered has cost them dearly,
maybe even more than what they originally lost?

And can we possibly deny, as we look at the state of our world today,
that continuing bitterness and resentment
does imprison both offender and offended,
perpetuate violence, prohibit reconciliation
and destroy hope of healing?

Though we may not care for the way Jesus says it,
we can't deny that the stakes can be that high.

So what better time than now, my dear friends, for you and I
to lean into those places where for whatever reason
the ability to forgive has eluded us, both individually and collectively.
And maybe open our hearts a bit more.

A former professor of mine, Dr. Pamela Cooper-White,
has written that the ability to forgive
is a matter of grace, not a work.¹
It is something we receive, rather than something we do.
That generally comes to us on God's timetable, not ours.

So then perhaps where you and I need to start is with asking God to help us.
Help us choose to forgive. Help us be willing to choose to forgive.
Or maybe, help us to be willing to be willing...to choose to forgive.

Because it is *really* hard.

¹ Cooper-White, Pamela, "Forgiveness: Grace, not Work" *Journal for Preachers* Vol 23 No 2 Lent 2009 pp. 16-23.

I had to laugh when, after I accepted Elizabeth's invitation to preach today,
 I saw what the texts were.
 I've got plenty of work to do. You may too.
 Work in finally releasing others and thereby releasing ourselves.

So now if it's okay, I invite you to think again
 of that person or situation that you brought to mind
 and set over there a short while ago.
 Or some other thing that may have come up for you
 as I've been speaking.

And hold them in thought as I share with you
 a brief meditation from *The Book of Forgiving*,
 by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho.

*"I will forgive you."
 The words are so small,
 but there's a universe hidden in them.*

*When I forgive you,
 all those chords of resentment and pain and sadness
 that had wrapped themselves around my heart will be gone.*

When I forgive you, you will no longer define me.

*You measured me and assessed me,
 and decided that you could hurt me;
 I didn't count.*

*But I will forgive you because I do count.
 I do matter.
 I am bigger than the image you have of me,
 I am stronger, I am more beautiful,
 and I am infinitely more precious than you thought me.*

I will forgive you.

*My forgiveness is not a gift that I am giving to you.
 When I forgive you, my forgiveness will be a gift
 that gives itself to me.*

