

As We Forgive Our Debtors

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 18: 21-35

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You may or may not remember, but one time I preached a sermon from this pulpit titled “Why Forgive?” No one said anything to me about the sermon title at the time, and I don’t know that people really pay much attention to my sermon titles. But if you did notice it, as a Christian you might have found that to be an offensive question. What do you mean why? Forgiveness after all is not just an afterthought in our faith, it is a central part of our faith. We are told, after all, to believe that it is only because of God’s forgiveness that we are allowed to be baptized and be called children of God and brothers and sisters to Christ. But offensive or not, I think this is a question we should ask ourselves from time to time. Why should we forgive? Now, I know that it is obvious that if we don’t forgive some of the things that are done to us over time, then we end up making fools of ourselves. If you didn’t invite me to your party one time and after ten years I’m still not speaking to you about it, then you would probably think I was pretty ridiculous.

But suppose it was something much more serious. Suppose what you were being asked to forgive was a murder, or a rape, or harm to a child. Why forgive in a circumstance like this. I like the way a man named John Kekes puts it “it is obscene to tell survivors of the Gulag, Nazi death camps, the torture chambers of Pol Pot, ethnic cleansing, or the massacres in Rwanda and the Congo that they should forgive. Why should they? They have excellent reasons to be resentful and bitter, and to feel anger, hatred and indignation because of the evil that was done to them and to those they loved.” Now, you might tell Kekes that forgiving even a great evil will make you feel a lot better. And that is something I don’t think anyone could deny. But on the other

hand getting revenge will do this just as well. As the old saying goes “Don’t get mad, get even”. Revenge feels pretty good, too. So why should we choose forgiveness instead of revenge?

Well, if you are still with me this morning, that is, if you haven’t tuned me out because I’ve asked you to think about things that you say we shouldn’t think about, here’s what I would say. Revenge may indeed feel pretty good from time to time. But I think the kind of satisfaction you get out of revenge is the satisfaction of completing a task that’s on your list of things to do. But I think the problem is that going through life trying to remember all the people who have wronged you and all the people you need to get back is really hard work.

And life is already hard enough. Just think of all the things you have to do in a lifetime. You have to go to school. After that, you have to go to work and even if you’re retired you still have to manage your money, you have to make sure you’re paying your bills on time. You have to watch after your own health. You have to eat right and get enough exercise. You have to watch after your plants and your pets making sure they’re nourished and cared for. You have to care about your friends and family and stay in touch with them, remember their birthdays and anniversaries, listen to their problems, and be ready to give good advice when they ask for it. You have to maintain your car and your home. At some point in your life you may have to raise children and make sure they are going to school, learning their manners, and learning how to dress and bathe themselves and at another point in life you may have to care for your aging parents. Life is a lot of work, and if on top of all that you have to make sure all those who wrong you are avenged, well then, that’s even more work. That’s even more work.

Wouldn't it be nice to be relieved of the job of avenging all the ways you've been wronged?
Wouldn't it be nice to have at least that much taken off your shoulders?

In our gospel lesson for today, Peter asks Jesus "If my brother sins against me how many times should I forgive him", and he asks, "Lord, is it as many as seven times?"

Jesus answers "Not seven, but seventy seven times." And then Jesus tells a story about a slave master who forgives a very large debt owed to him by one of his slaves, but then the slave master becomes angry because the slave won't forgive a much smaller debt of one of his fellow slaves. Now, usually when I have preached on this passage, I have talked about our need to forgive others when we realize how much God has forgiven us. And don't get me wrong, I think that's a good reason to forgive. We may not always think about how much God has forgiven us, but when we go through the ritual of remembering all our sins and confessing all our sins each day to God, it reminds us that if God forgives all this enormous debt of ours, we ought to forgive each other. I think that's a good enough reason for us to practice forgiveness. But I wish to emphasize the phrase for us. I don't know that this would work for your average person on the street. You see, we are all church people, and most of us are good Presbyterian church people, and we have grown up with believing that we are sinners against God and that we are sinners through and through, and so when someone says to us we ought to forgive others because God has forgiven us so much, that makes sense to most of us. As we say each week, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And by the way, I didn't grow up saying debts and debtors, I grew up with the Disciples of Christ and the Methodists saying trespasses. Debts and debtors always sounded strange to me. But I like it how whenever you're at a wedding or a baptism or some other event with a lot of people, you can always tell the non-Presbyterians in

the congregation because once you say debts and debtors they keep going on with that long phrase forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And when you're up at the pulpit leading the Lord's Prayer you always hear it as a murmur, and you have to wait until the murmur is over until you go on to the next line. But we Presbyterians we like to get through church as fast as possible because we've got to beat the crowd going out for lunch. Get the sermon over in 15 minutes, debts and debtors, done. But yeah, it makes sense to us to say the reason we forgive others is because we've been forgiven. But what would I say to the man or woman on the street who doesn't necessarily believe they have anything to be forgiven for? Well, I think I would say this. You see the word that the gospels use for forgiveness is the word *apheeaimi*, and *apheeaimi* means to forgive, but it also means to let go. To let go. And you see, this story about the slaves is not just about forgiveness, but it is about a slave who doesn't need to worry about what is owed to him because all his debts have been let go, they have been released, but he's acting like his debts have never been let go, going after another slave who owes him a few bucks. And so the reason we forgive is because in God's universe, regardless of what you may believe about how big a sinner you are and what you owe to God, it is too big a burden to go through life keeping track of what is owed to you. That is too big a burden. And the good news of the gospel is that we don't have to do that. We are let go. And because we are let go, we are free to let things go ourselves. And letting go doesn't mean that whatever you are being asked to forgive wasn't terrible. It doesn't mean it wasn't very, very wrong. It may have been. It may have humiliated you and robbed you of your dignity. But as terrible as it might have been, you don't have to get revenge in order to live a life of dignity. You were given

a life of dignity on the cross two thousand years ago. Let it go. Like it says in that song from the movie Frozen, let it go.

I know about a youth pastor one time who was leading a retreat for teenagers over the course of a few days, and every night they would climb to the top of this hill to this worship space where there was a giant cross and a space for a camp fire. And to go to this worship space each night, the youth pastor would ask them to take bring a pen and paper. And on the first night, he told them to take out a pen and paper and spend some time writing down all the ways they had been wronged in their lives. All the bad things that is that people had done to them. Well, the teenagers wrote furiously “Nicole talked behind my back—my teacher gave me an unfair grade—my boyfriend cheated on me.” On and on, long lists. And they wrote and wrote while the sun went down over the valley and finally they built a campfire and the youth leader said I want you to put this list in the fire. He didn’t say that they were to forgive these things because he knew that that would be too much to ask, and they wouldn’t do it, but he just said, I want you to put this list in the fire. And so they did. Well, the next evening they gathered again at the worship spot and he said to them, now I want you to make a list of all the wrong things you have ever done. So again they made long lists starting with whatever they did that day going all the way back to the time they could barely walk and talk but they told their parents a lie about sneaking a cookie from the cookie jar. At first some of the things were hard to remember, but once they could get started with a few memories, more and more memories came flooding back to them, a test they cheated on, a time they stole money from their mother’s purse, that time they made fun of the new kid in school because everyone else was doing it. And as they wrote for a long time and again as the sun went down, they once again

built a fire, and this time they were told that this fire represents forgiveness, and as they burn their lists in the fire it is to be a reminder to them that through Christ God forgives everything they have ever done. Well, as you can imagine this was a very emotional experience for the teens. There were lots of tears and hugs, and as the youth pastor strummed a few lines of Amazing Grace on guitar, one by one, the kids all walked by the fire and put in their lists. Well, finally on the third night, on the third night the youth pastor again assembled all the kids at the top of the hill, and he said this time we're going to rewrite the list you guys made on the first night of all the ways that you have been wronged and we're going to again put them in the fire, and this time he used the word forgive. He said together we're going to forgive these things. And some of the kids, as you would expect made the same long list they had two nights before. But here's the remarkable thing, for most of the teens, they couldn't remember their lists. They could write down one or two things, but as hard as they tried, after that emotional night of accepting God's forgiveness for all the things they had done, they could no longer remember all the many wrongs that had been done to them. You see, that's what God does for us in Christ. It isn't just forgiveness, it's letting go. It's releasing. Peter said to Jesus, Lord if my brother sins against me, how many times should I forgive him, up to seven times. Not seven times, but seventy seven times. Let it go. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.