

Forgiveness in Community
Matthew 18:21-35
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 13, 2020
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Maybe C.S. Lewis said it best, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive.”

And perhaps no story in scripture better illustrates this than the one Emily read for us today.

A servant owes a debt to his master. This isn't a small debt, it is not an inconsequential amount that he will quickly pay off. This isn't even a large debt, an amount that will make a true impact in his daily living but for which he knows he will see the light at the end of the tunnel. Rather his debt is so great that even if every penny he made over a lifetime of work was put toward paying it off, he could not complete the task. This is the type of debt that has so many zeros at the end of it, most of us can't even comprehend the number. This is a debt that the master realistically knows can never be paid, and that also gives him power to deal with it in any way he chooses.

And at first the master is ready to take harsh action - to sell not only the servant but also his family, to commit them to an enslaved life where this debt is always a part of their story, where it controls their every move.

But then he changes his mind. His heart opens and he has pity, mercy on the debtor. But even then he has choices. The reality is that he could have set up a payment plan - even if he knew he wouldn't ever get it all, he could have chosen to make this person pay a little every week or month, to keep this nagging debt in their view or, as he might have argued, to keep the debtor taking responsibility for the debt.

But instead, he chooses a radical route and in an unexpected turn of events, he forgives the debt in its entirety. The man is no longer a debtor; he is set free.

And wouldn't it be lovely if that were the end of the story?

Or wouldn't it be lovely if this lived lesson changed the man so quickly that, in his next interaction, he was prepared to extend that same grace to another?

But that isn't what happened. Instead, the man walks away forgiven only to enslave someone else to their debt.

Yes, he quickly encounters one who owes him a smaller, much more manageable amount of money, but rather than forgiving that debt, rather than even setting up a reasonable payment plan, he had his debtor thrown into prison. Scripture tells us he, “threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.” So not only are we left wondering in

what world being imprisoned makes anyone *more* able to pay off a debt, we are also left wondering why being forgiven didn't lead him to forgive.

And we are brought back to that quote from C. S. Lewis: Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive.

We know the truth of that. We know that forgiveness is a much easier ideal to hold on to than it is a practice to participate in. We even know that receiving forgiveness has its challenges. *And* we know that we really are better off when, in spite of all the challenges, forgiveness is a regular part of our lives.

And, the end of this parable, an ending that troubles us because the master who had been moved to pity is now moved to anger and punishment...an ending that troubles us because we have learned to compare the master in the parable to God...in this ending - which is hard - we should perhaps walk away with one main idea. What is that? It is that forgiveness really matters...that forgiveness is meant to be part of our lives. Perhaps, rather than hearing this as a threat of eternal damnation, we should simply hear ourselves being implored to engage in lives of forgiveness because we are all better when we do.

Friends, here is the reality - forgiveness is hard work. But if we are going to live this life fully, as humans who are both wonderful and broken...if we are going to engage in relationships with other simultaneously wonderful and broken human beings...then it is work we need to do. And it is ongoing work that will last our entire lives.

As I often say about things, it will be two steps forward and one step back and sometimes one step forward and two steps back.

We will have to extend grace to ourselves and to others along the journey and will have to do this more often than we want to.

But the rewards of living in communities where forgiveness is at the core will be enough to keep us going when the work is challenging.

Remember, here at First Christian, we call today Welcome! Sunday and we claim all year long to be a community of welcome for all people. That claim can be left as our best intention, or it can be worked on together as we embrace our call to speak honestly, to practice forgiveness, to work for equity for all people, and to live lives of integrity. These values that we hold at the core of who we are, even when they are difficult, are what remind us not only that we are welcome, but what help us to be and become more fully a community of welcome together.

Amen.