

Seventy-Seven Times  
[Matthew 18:15-35](#)  
First Sunday in Lent  
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Remember a few weeks ago when Pastor Lauren was preaching, and she spoke about how parables are complex stories that don't point to one moral truth? How, instead, parables make us work by inviting us into them to walk around and try on different roles and meanings?

Today's Scripture, with the parable of the unforgiving servant, is a great example of what Lauren was talking about.

Jesus seems to be telling us that forgiveness is very important; that we are to forgive generously, extravagantly, almost to the point of absurdity. Forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

And then we hear this story about a hypocritical slave who didn't forgive a debt, as he had been forgiven for a debt of his own, and so he is tortured by his master, which doesn't seem very... forgiving.

And this whole thing is supposed to be a metaphor for God and us?

*What* is going on here?

Here are two pieces of information that might help us we dive into today's Scripture, on this, the first Sunday in Lent. Lent as a time of focus: an invitation to reframe and reexamine who we are, an invitation to look at ourselves both as individuals and as a church in a way that both questions and supports our faith.

First: one way to look at the Book of Matthew is to think of it as a sort of book of etiquette; that is, a book which teaches the most desired, most challenging, most honorable conduct for this particular community to embrace. Its author was probably a Greek-speaking Jewish man, and its intended audience is a fledgling group of Jewish followers of Jesus, probably in Syria. While Matthew's author and audience think of themselves as Jews, the community is increasingly diverse in its outlook, widening the circle of its covenant to include non-Jews.

And so they can't organize themselves *only* around Jewish customs and practices and cultural knowledge. Instead, they're organizing themselves around Jesus and his teachings, including the social norms and community 'best practices' that are woven into everything he said.

The text we just heard offers a little blueprint for life together. The first section gives tips for dealing with conflict and human messiness. If someone sins against you, Jesus says, you are allowed to do something about it. But that action shouldn't take the form of gossip, or seething quietly in the corner. You need to confront them, head on. (Isn't it amazing how timeless that advice is?) And if that doesn't work, then ask for help. Widen the circle of accountability so that the debt between you can be settled.

And if that doesn't help, and you still are not reconciled, then the whole church needs to be involved. In other words, bad behavior cannot be tolerated, because the stakes are high. What we do here and now matters, Jesus is saying. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Which brings me to my second point: *Jesus loves hyperbole*. And hyperbole is a literary device.

Whenever we get stuck on something Jesus is saying because it sounds extreme, we should remember that Jesus was a storyteller. And like a stage actor playing to a large crowd, needing to be seen by the people in the very back row, he has to exaggerate his movements and expressions and project his voice.

As modern readers of the Bible, we have a seat right in the front row, and we read about the need to forgive seventy-seven times and the torture of a slave who *won't* forgive and we might think, "This is really intense and unrealistic and harsh."

Consider: perhaps it's meant to be intense and unrealistic and harsh.

Remember how the slave owes the king ten thousand talents? In biblical terms, that's bonkers. That's the equivalent of one modern person being held responsible for our country's collective credit card debt, which was over 1 trillion dollars in December 2018. In other words, original listeners would have immediately known that Jesus was talking in extremes to make a point.

But what is that point? Maybe it's this: when it comes to sharing a life of faith and building the kingdom together, we need to rethink the conventional rules concerning obligation, settlement, and forgiveness.

It seems to me that in Jesus' worldview, being in debt isn't necessarily this terrible, shameful thing that we should avoid at all costs. We all owe someone; and we are all owed something. It is a fact of life in community, this steady accumulation of debts.

But perhaps we're not meant to keep track of every single IOU—it isn't always about balancing the ledger or paying off the bills. It's about interrelationship. Interdependence.

In other words, there is such a thing as "good debt," but it has nothing to do with building credit or increasing your net worth and future value. 'Good' debt is the experience of receiving grace when you really, really need it—grace freely given, with *no* expectation of repayment or interest.

In Jesus' vision, the forgiveness of sins means relief; reconciliation; restoration to the fold. Exiled no more. He surely drew inspiration from the Hebrew Bible, where God demanded that every fifty years there would be a "Jubilee"—a special year when slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be available regardless of how hard you worked, or how little.

Now, I think there are limits to the analogy, especially when it comes to interpersonal relationships. Many of us are haunted by debts that cut very, very deep. We've been hurt—trespassed against, sinned against—physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually, financially.

Such debts are not easily paid back, and nor should they be. It's certainly not my right to tell anyone else when and how to forgive such a debt.

I can only say this: Jesus knows that we wound one another frequently; that we are the bearers of individual and collective liability. Do we want to be forever indentured to our lenders? Do we want to be permanent debt collectors? Too often, we act as if those are the only choices available. I think we need only to look at our broken world to see the calamity of such an approach.

A man well acquainted with calamity—and community—was the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Before his murder in 1945, he watched his country's mainstream Protestant church submit to Nazi leadership. As the institutional church failed to live out the Gospel, Bonhoeffer wrote a meditation on what he believed to be the obligations of Christian fellowship.

He wrote,

*The service of forgiveness is rendered by one to the others daily. It occurs, without words, in the intercessions for one another. And every member of the fellowship, who does not grow weary in this ministry, can depend upon it that this service is also being rendered to him by the brethren. He who is bearing others knows that he himself is being borne, and only in this strength can he go on bearing.*

In Bonhoeffer's vision of community, forgiveness—like bread—is given daily. It's given daily not because it's easy or always deserved, but because it makes us *stronger*.

And Bonhoeffer was a model of strength, and courage, and remaining steadfast in what he knew to be true, even as the Nazis told their terrible and hateful and persuasive lies.

There are lies in the air now. Lies that are designed to frighten and divide and destabilize us. I found out this week that a United Church of Christ colleague, a citizen of this country, has been placed on a travel watchlist by our government; she cannot enter Mexico and her Global Entry status has been revoked.

Why?

Because she is a high-profile advocate for immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers.

We need to be strong now. We need to hold on to the norms that we know to be good and true, norms that are far older and deeper than even the protections promised to citizens of this country. Norms that Jesus taught his followers so long ago, and that we can carry on regardless of what is happening around us.

And if we can glean *anything* solid from this strange parable, it is that forgiveness and mercy and grace should be the bedrock of our life together. When we do not strive to forgive (eventually, somehow, one way or another), everything falls apart and only pain follows.

But when we trust that God's grace is ours—no matter what—just think what we might have the courage to do and be.

May it be so. Amen.