

Forgiveness is a tough thing, and so I don't think it should come as a surprise that the teaching about forgiveness is not exactly anyone's favorite Scripture. Among my lectionary preaching colleagues there was a collective weeping and gnashing of teeth on Monday and Tuesday as they came to grips with seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, however you read it, it means a lot more than most of us would actually be able to manage. It's supposed to be, all the scholars agree that what Jesus means here is all the time. Right, good, you just have to keep forgiving and forgiving. We know it's good for us, holding grudges doesn't do anyone any good. Forgiving is like that diet that's heavy on Kale and light on bacon, we know it's healthy, but it doesn't seem right. The primary profound insight of this interaction between Jesus and Peter is that forgiving is good, do it a lot. Shortest sermon ever.

But then there is this parable, and well, things get uncomfortable again. The devil is in the details with this one, and to get the full effect of this parable, you need to understand it on two levels (at least). First is the level where it re-iterates the importance and necessity of forgiveness. God is the King, we are the slave who has been forgiven and it will go badly with us if we don't forgive others. Right, we've established the wisdom and blessing of forgiveness already. It's good for you, it is healthy for you, it is not actually about the person being forgiven as much as it is about the one doing the forgiving... right A+. That works about half way through this parable, and then the servant who was forgiven an unimaginable debt turns out to be not such a wonderful person and the King, who was so forgiving in the first place turns out to have a short fuse.

The last section of this parable creates a whole new problem for interpretation. So much so that at least one commentator wanted to just sort of write it off and blame it on Matthew, the Gospel writer, claiming that Matthew the human being just couldn't deal with God's unfathomable forgiveness and had to bend it back to some sort of standard. Rather than just ignore the end and blame poor Matthew, I'm going to go another route to get to a place where we don't lose the thread of abounding mercy, which I think remains at the core of this little story.

The problem starts I think, with the fairly reasonable assumption that the king in the story is God, most of the time in parables, God is the king, the father, the property owner or whatever authority figure happens to be at the center of things. But, the king in the parable would appear to have some interesting characteristics to a Hebrew audience. Taken as a whole, these incongruent ideas cast some doubt on the idea that the king is actually God. First of all, his "slaves," the Greek word *doule* specifically applies to a slave who is owned as chattel, distinguished from a servant (*diakonos*.) How does a slave owe 10,000 talents? That's an awful lot of money (Herod's total tax revenue was only 900 talents from all of the kingdom), and the man is a slave, not a subject (a Hebrew king never would have referred to his subjects as slaves) or even a servant. Another thing that sets him apart from a Hebrew king is that the remedy is selling the man and his wife and kids as well. Except that was illegal, it was one thing to "sell" a debtor into slavery, but the Israelites did not include families in that bargain. A man could become a slave to pay off a debt, meaning his work and his life would be given to another, but this sort of "selling" of people was a decidedly gentile practice. In addition to that the King, when he finds out about the forgiven man being so harsh with his debtor he turns the man over to the torturer, not something that would have seemed just in the Hebrew mind. The practice of slavery outlined in the Law was extremely justice oriented, it was to ensure that there was accountability and security among the

people. It was a sort of safety net, and the treatment of people who had fallen on difficult times had a good set of safeguards to ensure that they had access to justice.

Given that this man had owed an unimaginable sum of money, this ending is not restorative in any way, but essentially means he is going to be tortured to death, which is not the sort of justice that Jesus would normally put on God's hands. Unless he was actually pointing this at the people he did hold guilty and speak against all the time: the old Scribes and Pharisees (see all of Mt. 23). These people have a special guilt in their harsh and unforgiving conduct because they know what the law prescribes, they know that justice is tempered with mercy, they know that the Lord is abundant in steadfast love and slow to anger. They know this and yet they lord their authority over the people, and they get rich at the expense of the poor, they are vultures picking at the carcass of defenseless people, they are a "brood of vipers." They are provoking God, more than any run of the mill sinner could possibly do, they are using the Lord's name in vain in actual fact, in a way that is a lot worse than just shouting a curse when you stub your toe.

We need to take this parable about forgiveness and point it at ourselves. We have been forgiven, redeemed actually. In our tradition we recognize a profound and inescapable sin in each one of us, but we also know that, even though we owe a debt we cannot possibly pay, we are forgiven and that should make each one of us, and also our church collectively, super ready to forgive others. But instead we too often insist on roughing people up for being sinners. The idea that grace should be contagious and mercy be self-renewing is not an isolated back-burner idea in Jesus' teaching. It is one of the central ideas. Unfortunately it leaves the gate keepers and the arbiters of purity with an impossible job, the job of judging in the name of a God who forgives as many times as it takes. That should maybe tell us that it is a job that doesn't need doing, but instead we decide to just go all Pharisee on people because it's hard to maintain your control if you just flat give up the leverage you have to get people to color inside the lines. Why I think so many of my colleagues were loath to tackle this parable, is that most of them, like me are troubled by the King who forgives once, but then crushes the one who doesn't forgive. That God seems all too familiar, but that God doesn't really actually jive with what Jesus showed us about God.

That god is actually one we find rather convincing; sure he's merciful and can forgive some pretty big things, but there has to be a line doesn't there? Doesn't there? I think it's important for most religious systems that there be a line, call it holiness, call it righteousness, call it The Law, call it the Five Pillars, or Dharma, or the Eight Fold Path, some even refer to the Gospel as that sort of line, there has to be some sort of standard right? Right?

What if the King is not God in this parable? I'm not saying there is no connection, Jesus clearly says if you don't forgive, God will act like that king, but that doesn't necessarily mean that God is the same as that king. What if the King is just a king who tried to act with mercy towards a slave who then proved to be unworthy and then the king snapped back to the way the world normally works? What then? What if the ridiculous slave who was forgiven something that could never be repaid and then turned around and harassed another over a couple dollars is not the only person who fails to meet God's standard of forgiveness? What if the King fails too? Even though he seems to be totally justified in revoking his forgiveness. Do we believe that God is like that? Incredibly kind, but with a red line that you had better not cross.

Isn't Jesus living proof that God's red line is at least not where we think it is, and doesn't the forgiveness that came after we crucified him and rejected him at least make you wonder if that red line even exists at all?

I'm going back again to my working assumptions that we are our own worst enemy. What if being "turned over to be tortured" is simply going back to living in the back-biting, revenge seeking, quid pro quo world that we all assume must be reality? This seems to say that if we do not forgive we are doomed to live in an unforgiving world, but what if that is not God's sentence on us, but simply what we choose over the option that God offers us in Jesus Christ? What if rejecting God's nature as loving and merciful we decide that we simply must live inside a system of judgment and retribution? What if we neglect restoration and redemption and settle for "justice" that is merely punitive? What if, having glimpsed the wideness of God's mercy, we revert back to our small, petty, vindictive ways? Wouldn't that be hellish? It is, it is torture, it is torture for us and torture for the world, it is the spirit of Antichrist, and we will never be rid of it until we learn to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Our sin has such a tight grip on us that only a constant application of God's love and mercy can break us out of it. Seven times, seventy seven times, seventy times seven, however you want to say it. If we, having been forgiven that extensively are still not able to have our cup overflow and be merciful to others and forgive, truly, deeply, in a way that liberates us and the world from our bitter grudges, how can we expect to understand and know a God who can and does forgive utterly and truly the debts which cannot be repaid, 77 times, as many times as it takes?