

God Forgives Because We Forgive

This morning's Gospel picks up where we left off last week. Jesus has given the disciples a process to resolve conflicts in the church and has promised to be with any two or more faithful people who gather together in his name. Then, Peter asks Jesus if he has to forgive another member of the church who sins against him as many as seven times. We can imagine his crestfallen reaction when Jesus tells him to forgive not just seven, but *seventy-seven* times. To illustrate, Jesus tells a parable about a slave who owes his master a debt too enormous ever to repay. When the master orders the slave to be sold, along with his wife and children, the slave pleads for mercy and the master forgives the debt. The slave then turns around, assaults a second slave who owes him far less money, and hurls him into prison until the lesser sum is paid. Upon learning that the first slave showed the second slave no mercy, the angry master hands the first slave over to be tortured until he pays off the entire debt which, of course, he'll never be able to do. Jesus assures Peter that the Father will do the same to everyone who fails to forgive others from the heart. Nothing drives home a point quite like the threat of eternal torment.

This parable is troubling. How could an enslaved person possibly incur such a huge debt to his master that it could never be repaid? What about the master's plan to sell the slave's wife and children – why should they suffer? The first slave was wrong to treat the second slave so badly, but where's the justice in brutalizing the first slave when the master knows he can't possibly make good on the debt? And why is Jesus making threats about our supposedly loving Father in Heaven inflicting eternal torture on us when we sometimes struggle to forgive? Whatever happened to “Jesus our brother, kind and good”? And how is all of this relevant to us?

We can start by recognizing that it's just as difficult to forgive today as it was in Jesus's time. Beloved children of God or not, our DNA proves that human beings are also primates,

descended from a common ancestor that we share with chimpanzees, and some of our basic animal impulses aren't very pretty. When we feel attacked or someone we love is threatened, we instinctively go on the defensive. Sometimes we become the aggressor, attacking those who've wronged us before they can hurt us again. We can become vengeful - just imagine the violence that Pharaoh would have inflicted on the Hebrews in retaliation for the Passover if God hadn't taken his army away. And we have very long memories. History is full of multigenerational family feuds, endless wars between nations, and tribal hatreds that flare up and cool down but are never entirely extinguished. Even Scripture seemingly encourages revenge. Leviticus says, "[a]nyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered." The problem with that approach, though, is that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves the whole world blind and toothless. Besides, we can't rely on Leviticus to justify payback when "vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" in Deuteronomy. And, in this morning's Gospel, we have Jesus telling us to either forgive those who hurt us or expect to be tortured if we don't.

It's not like Jesus to threaten his followers with divine punishment for sin. In fact, that threat seems to contradict Jesus's work to replace excessive reliance on the letter of sacred law with the larger principle of loving God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's hard to love a God who promises to beat the snot out of you unless you forgive everyone who wrongs you, no exceptions. So, Bible scholar Douglas R. A. Hare is probably right that we shouldn't presume a perfect parallel between the master in this parable and God. The master is cruel enough to contemplate selling the slave's wife and children. His decision to pardon the slave seems arbitrary, even capricious. God may work in mysterious ways, but faith tells us that God isn't capricious or cruel. Besides, God sees us as beloved

children, not as slaves. Perhaps the master in this parable represents not God, but the ugly, self-destructive human urges that eat us alive when we refuse to forgive.

When someone really hurts you, being told to forgive them may feel like adding insult to injury. They're the wrongdoer – why should they get off the hook so easily? They don't deserve to be forgiven. That may be true, but withholding forgiveness hurts you more than it does them. It's easy to become obsessed with the unfairness of hurtful situations and the craving to see other people get what's coming to them, but it isn't healthy, and it isn't our problem alone. The people who love us also have to live with our brooding, bitterness, and inability to look away from past injuries long enough to appreciate whatever lovely, healing things are happening in the here and now. It's not God who tortures us when we refuse to forgive. We torture ourselves, and Jesus loves us enough that I suspect he'd very much rather we didn't.

The *Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* explains that “[t]o forgive is to give up or absolve legitimate claims upon another, as when a debt is forgiven.” It's about choosing mercy over justice, making a conscious decision to let go of resentment and forgo revenge no matter how much the other person deserves it. It's not about forgetting the injury or telling yourself that it didn't matter. It's about deciding, as many times as it takes, not to let your feelings about it eat you alive. And while the *Episcopal Dictionary* also says that “[i]n forgiveness, a relationship is restored or renewed,” that doesn't mean you have to pretend the offense never happened or go back to how things were before it did. Restoring and renewing a relationship may mean coming back together in mutual respect and love. It may also mean bidding the other person a respectful but firm farewell. Letting someone repeatedly abuse you isn't forgiveness. It's victimhood, and it isn't any better for the abuser than it is for you.

Jesus taught us to pray to the Father “to forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” People sometimes assume that means that if we forgive only 32.74% of the trespasses of others, God will forgive only and exactly 32.74% of ours. I think that’s a misinterpretation. The image of flocks of angels sitting in the clouds with calculators figuring out exactly what percentage of the trespasses of others each one of us forgives on any given day has a certain absurdist charm, but it smacks of that “tit for tat” legalism that Jesus wants us to avoid. It’s probably also a mistake to say that God will only forgive us if we first forgive absolutely, positively every last single trespass that anyone else has ever committed against us. Forgiveness can be hard for us, and it can take time. God knows that. I believe he wants us to admit and repent of our own imperfections and sincerely try to forgive those of others, but I don’t think he withholds divine forgiveness from us if we can’t quite forgive someone else right away despite making a good faith effort.

St. Teresa of Avila believed that God wants to give us the supernatural gift of mutual love from which forgiveness naturally flows. But we need to learn how to use that gift, which requires us to practice loving and forgiving, especially when it’s hard and we’d really rather nurse our grudges and pout. We won’t do it as well as God does because we’re not God. But God is very willing to forgive us our trespasses when we make the attempt, not in the same measure as we do, but much more completely, because he knows we’re doing our sincere if imperfect best.

In a few minutes, we’ll pray the prayer Jesus gave us, and ask our Father to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. As we do, we can be grateful that God is more generous and forgiving than we can sometimes be. And we can trust that our trespasses will be forgiven not only to the extent that we forgive others, but completely, because God loves us, and he knows how hard we try. Amen.