



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Forgive Us As We Forgive

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 18:21-35

June 19, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There will be a time in your life when you will find yourself thinking about forgiveness—either because you need to offer it or you need to receive it. In that moment, the questions will come. Are there limits to God’s forgiveness? Are there limits to our forgiveness? Aren’t people supposed to be held accountable? How many times does one deserve to be forgiven?

Jesus’ disciples asked these questions, too. Trying to balance grace and accountability, they asked, “How often do we forgive?” Peter threw out what he thought was a big number, “Should we forgive seven times?” Jesus responds, “What about 77 times?” In other words, if you are counting, you’ve missed the point. But 77 times? That’s a lot of forgiveness!

So, as he often did, Jesus told a story. A king wants what’s owed him. One servant is brought who owes 10,000 talents. Most laborers in those days never saw a talent. It would take a really long time for the average laborer to earn 10,000 talents: approximately 150,000 years. It’s a ridiculous sum—an unpayable sum.

But the silliness of this story continues. Regardless of the impossibility, the servant pleads and promises, “Just give me some time. I will gladly pay you everything.” Well, he can’t. Even if he is given until the end of time, he couldn’t repay it.

Nevertheless, the king shows mercy. “Your debt is forgiven.” But then, this same servant goes out and meets a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii, or about what one might earn over the summer. He says, “Pay me.” The second servant pleads, using the same words of the first servant, “Be patient with me and I will repay you everything.” But this time, there is no mercy. And because being poor has often, and is still often, against the law,

the debtor is tossed into prison.

In response, the crowd boos. What a schmuck! After receiving grace beyond counting, he can’t distribute a modest measure of grace. The grace bestowed upon him does not influence his own choices.

Unlike some of Jesus’ stories, we read this one and we think: “I’m better than that. I wouldn’t be that hard-hearted. If I had just been forgiven an unpayable sum, I would be kinder to one who owed me a little.” You would. But how much would we be willing to forgive? I mean, there comes a point when we are not so sure that we can forgive. There are limits to forgiveness, aren’t there?

Today is Juneteenth. I trust you know the story by now. June 19, 1865 was the day when word reached the last enslaved people in this country. Union Troops arrive in Galveston, Texas with the glad tidings: “You are free.” It is only the second year we have recognized this as a national holiday. It should be right up there with the Fourth of July as a celebration of freedom.

Many of us gathered yesterday at the Juneteenth celebration in Prairie Village. We need these celebrations because we are both, at the same time, free and we are not free. We need to keep reminding ourselves that we are living toward a freer, more just, more perfect union.

As a reminder of the work we have to do, two days ago was the seventh anniversary of the mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. There have been so many, you may not remember this one. Dylann Roof, at 21 years of age, attended a Bible study at the Mother Emmanuel Church. They were studying the fourth chapter of Mark—how the seed sometimes falls on rocky ground, sometimes among weeds.

But before the study ended, he killed eight

members of the congregation. Like the more recent shooting in Buffalo, New York, he didn't know his victims, he just knew that they were Black and that was reason for him to take their lives.

He slipped away, not wanting to pay for his crimes, but was caught. When he was arraigned, members of the victims' families, still fresh in their shock and grief, were allowed to speak. Nadine Collier, whose mother was murdered, while choking back sobs, said "I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again—but I forgive you... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."¹

When asked later, what made her offer forgiveness, she quoted the parable we read today, "Should you not have had mercy as I had mercy on you?" I remember hearing her speak and being taken aback. But others found her forgiveness revolting. It came too soon or too easily, they said. It lacked honor for those who had been murdered, they said. To forgive failed to respect the pain that so many were feeling. It was too much grace; not enough accountability. There are limits to our forgiveness, aren't there?

It is difficult because it seems that forgiveness implies that everything is fine. Like we are saying: "Forget about it. It doesn't matter. Everything is fine. It's nothing." But that's not forgiveness.

When something has gone wrong, when we are the ones who have offended, when you have injured another, disappointed another, sinned against another, the first response is not to ask for forgiveness. The first response is to do what we can to make it right.

A few weeks ago, I told you how I learned to repair a window—at least the way they made windows in the 1970s. I learned because I threw my baseball through the van Arsdale's living room window. As I shared a few weeks ago, my Dad said, "You break it, you fix it."

That is what faith calls us to do first. When something is wrong in us or the world, our faith calls us to try to make things right. But forgiveness is needed when things can't be made right.

No matter how hard we might work, the debt can never be paid. It is impossible. I think what Nadine Collier knew is that Dylann Roof could go to prison for the rest of his life, but it will never make things right. The only way she will find her way to peace is to forgive.

So, is there a limit? With us, often there is. But there doesn't seem to be with God. Even from the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgiven them." While he was being crucified, he offered forgiveness.

I don't always have that strength. I have been hurt. You have, too. Unjustly at times. It is infuriating. In those moments, it is difficult to speak of forgiveness. Oh, I might be able to forgive a small amount, but a significant injustice? That's harder. When the world treats us unjustly, it's hard just to extend grace.

So, what do we do with this story from Jesus? If I understand the text, it invites us to let our lives be shaped less by what the world does to us and more by what God has done for us. To let our actions be shaped not by how the world has treated us, but by what God has done for us.

Several years ago, friends Judy and Jim Heeter invited Carol and I to attend the dinner for the Midwest Innocence Project (MIP). It is a nonprofit that works to exonerate prisoners who have been wrongly incarcerated.

Because Judy was president of MIP, she placed Carol and I at the head table. Carol sat next to the keynote speaker, author, John Grisham. He knows how to write a page turner. He's also Presbyterian. Every year for my birthday, my younger brother gives me the latest Grisham novel. So I had read most of them. Carol, who prefers to read other things, said, "If we sit at his table, you sit next to him since you have read so many of his books."

The only nonfiction book he has written is titled "The Innocent Man."² It is the story of two men who were wrongly convicted of murder. We arrived and Carol was placed next to John Grisham. They placed me next to a guy I didn't know, not at first. It was Dennis Fritz. He was one of the men who was wrongfully imprisoned. He had lost 12 years of his life. As we ate our salads, we began to visit.

1 David Von Drehle, "How do you forgive a murderer?" *Time Magazine*; Charleston Shooting Cover Story.

2 John Grisham, *The Innocent Man*, 2006.

I imagine there were days when the injustice he experienced infuriated him. I was a bit angry just knowing the story. But that night, he spoke with grace and even joy. I asked, “Are you angry?” “Not really,” he said, “I can’t hold on to that. No need to let what they did to me mess with today, too. They took enough days from me, but this one is mine. God has been good to me,” he said.

I don’t think I am that faithful, but I think that is what faithfulness looks like. I think he was letting the gospel shape him.

In the story, the servant was forgiven, but he couldn’t bring himself to forgive. Connecting those dots is no easy thing. But if I understand the text, Jesus invites us to let what God has done for us shape how we respond to what the world does to us. I saw that happen in a woman, who I have only met once and only briefly.

Earlier I spoke of the shooting at the Mother Emmanuel church. The Sunday after that happened, I joined a handful of Village members at the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Ivanhoe. I hadn’t been there before. At the time, I had yet to meet Dr. Hartsfield, their amazing pastor. I should have let them know I was coming,

but I just showed up. I didn’t know the building well, so I entered the building, but it wasn’t the main door. I walked down a hallway and rounded a corner and came face-to-face with a woman. We shook hands, but in her eyes, I think I saw fear. I think she was afraid of me. I am ashamed to admit that it didn’t dawn on me that an unknown white man might cause her to be afraid simply because I was there. I know better now. What I saw in her eyes was fear. But what she said to me as she shook my hand was, “Welcome to Metropolitan. You are welcome here.” I can’t recall a time in my life when I have been that faithful. What I mean is: I can’t recall a time when I have let what God has done for me shape how I treated others in such a fashion. But I want to.

I think if we are honest, for most of us, there is a limit to forgiveness. So, when it comes to those we cannot bring ourselves to forgive, we should remember that God has forgiven them. Like it or not, God has forgiven them. And God will forgive us, too, when we can’t bring ourselves to do the same—at least when we can’t yet. But maybe someday everything we do will be shaped by what God has done for us.