

Matthew 18:21-35

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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I grew up with four siblings, and I was the one who was obsessed with things being “fair.” I watched with great intensity as my mother cut slices of cake to be absolutely sure they were all exactly the same size. And if they weren’t, I could have an adolescent meltdown. It had to be fair, and it had to be right. And I took that from adolescence into adulthood and, if I’m being honest, sometimes well into middle age. And it didn’t bring me much peace or joy. But somewhere along the way, I had decided that was just the way things worked. That was the system.

We live in a world warped by systemic injury. And I think part of what makes those systems so powerful is that most of the time we don’t even recognize them as systems. They just seem like the way the world works. We learn the rules. We learn what is fair and what isn’t. We learn who deserves what. We learn what happens when somebody crosses us. And after a while, we don’t even think about it anymore. It just feels like reality. The system says, “You hurt me, and I hurt you. You owe me, and I collect. You are wrong, and I make sure you pay.” Then Jesus comes along and says, “You have heard it said. But I say to you...” Jesus takes entire systems we accept as normal and turns them on their heads. We see it when laborers who work one hour receive the same wage as those who worked all day, when the last become first, and when outsiders are welcomed in. Peter still has his ledger open. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as 7 times?” Seven times is generous when someone keeps getting on your last nerve. But Peter is still counting. Jesus answers, “Not 7 times, but 77 times.” Some translations say 70 times 7. But if we are debating whether Jesus means 77 or 490, we have missed the point. Jesus is taking the arithmetic out of forgiveness. Those numbers are not accidental. In Genesis, after Cain kills Abel, Lamech boasts that if Cain is avenged sevenfold, Lamech will be avenged seventy-sevenfold. Retaliation must keep escalating until everybody knows not to cross me. Jesus takes Lamech’s arithmetic of vengeance and reverses it. Where Lamech multiplies revenge, Jesus multiplies forgiveness. “Stop counting. Do not let the injury keep reproducing itself through you.”

Then Jesus tells of a servant who owes 10 thousand talents. In today’s wages, think somewhere in the neighborhood of 6 billion dollars. Yes, you heard that right. 6 billion. An absurd, impossible, unpayable amount. And the servant says, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” As if he could. He does not need more time or a better payment plan; he needs an entirely different reality. The king, moved with pity, releases him and cancels the debt. The servant walks out and finds a man who owes him 100 denarii—something like 10 thousand dollars in today’s wages. That second debt is real. It is not pocket change, and Jesus does not ask us to pretend otherwise. But compared with the billions the servant has just been forgiven, it is almost nothing. And still he grabs the man by the throat and demands payment. The tragedy is that the servant receives unimaginable grace, but grace does not change his imagination. He has been released from the ledger, but still carries the ledger inside him. He has left the prison, but the prison has not left him.

I understand that servant more than I want to. Sometimes I want to see my enemies punished. I know the thought: “Just wait until we get in power. Then it will be our turn.” I can dress that impulse up as justice. Sometimes it is justice. But sometimes, if I’m being real, I simply want to hurt them like they hurt me. The parable asks whether I want freedom from the system or merely my turn at the top of it.

Forgiveness is not pretending nothing happened, calling evil good, or restoring trust where there is no trustworthiness. It is not returning to abuse or reconciling without repentance and repair. Matthew gives instructions for confronting harm before Peter asks about forgiveness. Christian mercy does not require us to lie or return to danger. Forgiveness surrenders the fantasy that another person's suffering will heal me. I can seek truth, protection, accountability, and repair without making someone else's destruction my salvation.

The Rev Dr. Martin Luther King understood this. He said: *"There will come a time when the person who hates you most, the person who has used you the most, the person who has said the worst things about you—there will come a time when you will have an opportunity to get even... That is the time that you must not do it. That is the meaning of love."* He is not telling oppressed people to stop resisting. His whole life says otherwise. He distinguishes defeating an unjust system from destroying a human being. Love can march, protest, expose a lie, enforce a boundary, remove someone from office, and insist upon consequences. But love refuses to make hatred its home.

The poet and mystic David Whyte writes: *"Forgiveness is a heartache and difficult...To forgive is to put oneself in a larger gravitational field of experience than the one that first seemed to hurt us...We allow ourselves to be gifted by a story larger than the story that first hurt us and left us bereft."*

Sometimes forgiveness comes as a decision; sometimes slowly, through grief. The prayer may simply be, "God, I cannot release this yet. Hold it until I can." Forgiveness may begin alone. That kind of freedom cannot be manufactured by gritting our teeth. It requires a reorientation of the heart. This is why today's gospel doesn't end with "Go forgive. Go serve. Go be nicer." We know how to turn grace into homework. I hear a deeper invitation here: let God change the world we believe we inhabit. And that change can feel like dying because something is dying: the self that must win, the need to see the enemy punished, and the illusion that perfect accounts can keep us safe. Jesus calls this losing our life in order to find it. On the other side of that death is resurrection. Something in us dies, and somehow we become more alive. It does not mean everything goes our way. But we become less controlled by what was done to us and we can tell the truth without surrendering our souls to vengeance.

The parable ends harshly: the unforgiving servant is handed over to torture. I don't believe God delights in torture. I hear a warning about the world the servant insists on inhabiting. He clings to the ledger and the prison, and that world closes around him. And we have the opportunity, if we dare, to make a different choice. We often say that Jesus turns the world upside down. But I think we have it backwards. We are the ones living upside down. We have mistaken vengeance for justice, scorekeeping for righteousness, and domination for strength. Jesus comes to turn us right side up.

The good news is not that God has handed us a more demanding ledger with "forgive 77 times" written at the top. The good news is that in Christ, God closes the book. We are released from the impossible account. There is no ledger. We belong to the Lord in life and in death. When that grace moves from something that happened to us into a new reality within us, mercy begins to flow. We stop asking when we have forgiven enough. We stop needing another person's defeat to prove that we have won. We discover that resurrection is possible even here, even now. The world will call that upside down. Jesus calls it the kingdom of God.