

“Responding to Grace with Gratitude”

I’m going to begin this morning with a confession.

My confession is that there’s a person in my life that I struggle to forgive.

The real truth is I don’t want to forgive this person.

To be completely honest, I find this person’s sins against some members of my family to be unforgiveable.

Moreover, this person denies having done anything wrong, let alone having ever asked for anyone’s forgiveness.

Yet in response to Peter’s question asking how many times we should pardon someone who has sinned against us Jesus’ answer essentially is that we are to extend forgiveness an unlimited number of times.

Does this apply to someone who refuses to take responsibility for what they’ve done and ask to be forgiven?

I know how I’d like Jesus to answer that question – I’d like to be let off the hook!

Our Gospel reading this morning is actually Jesus’ second straight teaching about how to handle someone having sinned against us.

In the verses before these in which Peter asked how many times we’re to forgive another member of the church who’s sinned against us, Jesus taught that the first thing we’re to do is to go to that person for a one-on-one conversation.

If the offender doesn’t admit the wrong and apologize, then Jesus said to take along a couple of witnesses and try again.

Then if the person remains unrepentant, the next step is to report it to the whole church.

And if the offender still refuses to acknowledge their guilt and sorrow, then the person is basically to be ostracized.

It's in response to this teaching that Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive a member of the church who's sinned against us.

In other words, how many times are we to forgive someone who asks us to do so, even though they continue repeating the sin.

Seven times, Jesus? No, seventy-seven times, responded Jesus.

Jesus illustrated his response to Peter with a parable about the radical implications of living as forgiven people.

A slave deeply in debt to the king and completely unable to pay begs for grace for himself and his family.

Although the king had planned to sell not only the man, but also his wife and children to satisfy what was owed, he instead chose to be compassionate and forgave the entire debt.

Slate wiped clean – completely fresh start.

It's reasonable to assume that having received such unearned grace himself that from a place of gratitude that the slave would extend similar mercy to anyone indebted to him.

But that's not how the story goes.

After leaving the king's presence the slave comes upon a fellow slave who owes him far less money. The slave grabs his debtor by the throat and demands repayment.

When the one who owes the forgiven slave money begs him for more time, instead of responding with the kind of grace he himself had just received from the king, the forgiven slave threw his debtor into prison.

Naturally, their fellow slaves were horrified that one of their own after having himself received such amazing mercy refused to be at all merciful to his own debtor.

They tattled to the king, who was understandably enraged, and ordered the slave to be tortured until he repaid his entire debt – in other words, to be punished forever.

Jesus' parable this morning illustrates how seriously God takes forgiveness.

Writing about this Scripture for *The Christian Century* magazine, Disciples of Christ President of Higher Education and Leadership Ministries Chris Dorsey states, *“the failure to forgive disrupts, distorts, and ultimately degrades community.”*

Dr. Dorsey goes on to say that God desires for us to live in *“just and compassionate communities.”*

Jesus' parable this morning also illustrates how seriously God takes human sin.

As Christians, we're the forgiven slave in Jesus' parable.

We believe we've received God's unearned blanket pardon for our sins – past, present and future – through Jesus' self-sacrifice on the Friday we call **“good.”**

Jesus' parable teaches that as people who've received unmerited Divine grace that there are then implications for living our lives in this world.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, *“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”* the implication is that in gratitude for the radical Divine grace we've received that we will then so extend our own grace to others.

And not just once or twice or seven times, but as many times as necessary to foster healthy relationships with one another, within the church, and beyond.

These are complex, hard teachings to hear.

Not for those of us on the receiving end of radical Divine grace, but for those of us called to then extend grace to those who have harmed us or people we love.

While on the one hand, from a place of gratitude for the unmerited grace we've received we're called to extend that same kind of forgiveness to others, on the other hand, we're not, for example, called to return to abusive and harmful relationships.

According to retired Executive Director of the Centers for Christian Studies at Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, North Carolina Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, *"Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other."*

"Forgiveness is not denying our hurt."

Indeed, she goes on to say, *"When we minimize what happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive."*

Cleghorn continues, *"Forgiveness is not an excuse for unjust behavior, and to forgive is not necessarily to forget."*

For example, she notes there are, *"Some events and situations we should **not** forget: the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, exploitation of children and women, mistreatment of Native peoples, the infidelity of a spouse, a lie told that turned your life upside down, abuse, or betrayal."*

Jesus' teachings about forgiveness are inseparable from truth telling and accountability.

In preparation for last month's Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy Gathering Eden Seminary Professor Ben Sanders recorded and invited commissioners to watch a video on the topic of "Ecological/Environmental Racism."

Then during the meeting Dr. Sanders responded to questions from commissioners.

Dr. Sanders named as a sin the dehumanization and oppression of non-white people in the name of Jesus in Christian America.

He didn't call it an unforgiveable sin, but he did state that all of us are products of creation and that God will not be pleased with how whites have treated non-white bodies in this country.

Dr. Sanders went on to remind us as a way to think about Kenosha and all the other places around our country in which unarmed African Americans have been shot by police is that in our Hebrew Scriptures God judges the quality of Israel's life by how they treat the least of these.

He went on to say that relearning and retelling our American Christianity stories will change how we shape worship, discipleship, mission and our budgets.

If you haven't read the presbytery's "Apology To Our African American Sisters And Brothers For The Sin Of Slavery And Its Legacy" I encourage you to do so and use it as one way to reflect how we can respond to the unmerited grace we have received from God with our gratitude expressed through our worship, discipleship, mission, and budgets.

The "Apology" document is available from the Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery's "Social Action" menu on its website.

Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.