

Time To Make A Difference—Part 2

Time to Forgive

Rev. Rob Carter

OT Proper 19—24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 18: 21-35

9/17/14

Prayer for Illumination

We give thanks, O God of sacred stories,
for the witness of holy Scripture.

Through it, you nurture our imaginations, touch our feelings,
increase our awareness, and challenge our assumptions.

Bless, we pray, our hearing of your word this day.

Speak to each of us;

 speak to all of us;

 and grant that by the power of your Spirit,

 we may be hearers and doers of your word. Amen.

Matthew 18: 15-20

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

 Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king
 who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle accounts,

 they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand talents.

Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back,

 the master ordered that he should be sold,

 along with his wife and children and everything he had,

 and that the proceeds should be used as payment.

But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said,

 ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’

The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

“When that servant went out,

 he found one of *his* fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins.

He grabbed him around the throat and said,

 ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him,

‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’
 But he refused.
 Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

“When his fellow servants saw what had happened,
 they were deeply offended.
 They came and told their master all that happened.

His master called the first servant and said,
 ‘You wicked servant!
 I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me.
 Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant,
 just as I had mercy on you?’

His master was furious
 and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners,
 until he had paid the whole debt.

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you
 if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Time to Make a Difference – Part 2

“Time to Forgive”

I gotta tell you. I loved last week. The energy. The enthusiasm. The food. For those unable to be with us, last Sunday we celebrated Homecoming Sunday—a day on which we not only celebrated a wonderful time of fellowship amid a luncheon, but it was also a day we kicked off the start of a new programmatic year, and new seasons of church school and music ministry and a brand-new Adult Spiritual Formation program that was unveiled.

I *loved* the celebration of it all, because it was really a celebration of Towson Presbyterian Church. A celebration of the ministries our community has shared. And a celebration of the potential and possibilities that still reside within the heart of this special community of faith. Potential and possibilities that are waiting to be

tasted and explored. in the form of spiritual formation, and new family ministries, and new mission and outreach programs... all of them new ways to make a difference!

As we heard Paul say in his letter to the Romans, “*Now* is the time. Not tomorrow... not years from now... *now* is the time to pay attention, for salvation is at hand. So wake up!” he said. “Don’t miss the boat. Right now, God is as close to us as our very breath, inviting us to participate not only in the transformation of our own lives, but in the transformation of the whole world.”

So the time is now, according to Paul, for us to seek transformation. Your transformation. My transformation. This community’s transformation. Baltimore’s transformation. The world’s transformation. Now is the time to live faith *fully* by seeking to transform old ways built on false hopes and broken promises into a new life built on the promises of God who invites us to be coworkers in the kingdom.

Now... is the time to make a difference!

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But as we also shared last week, this transformation thing ain’t easy. If it was, the world wouldn’t be filled with so much need and injustice. Need and injustice on the communal level, because of the transformation that is still needed on personal level. For each of us, in our own way, has old grudges and hidden prejudices, misplaced priorities and secret wounds we’ve been holding onto so long that we’re not sure we really *want* them to be transformed. It’s scary to think of what it might be like to let go of something old we’ve been clinging to... even if that thing has brought us more pain than blessing.

But as Paul makes clear in our lesson from Romans this morning, the community to which disciples are called is nothing less than *transformed* community... where people let go of this world’s ways and seek to live by grace. Paul goes on to offer examples of what a transformed community might look like

as he pictures a community where strong members don't judge weaker members, but help them. Where people don't waste time judging those different from them, but strive to "listen and learn from others who see things from different perspectives."¹

And in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus cuts even deeper into the heart of the matter when he's asked a good question by Peter. "Okay Jesus, " Peters says, "I get it. You want us to practice grace. But tell me, how many times should we forgive another who keeps on hurting us? Seven times?" he asks.

Now, while many of us have heard this story before, let's face it honestly. Seven seems like more than enough times to forgive someone who repeatedly hurts you, doesn't it?

But the uncomfortable answer Peter—and we—receive from Jesus, is that like it or not, something like forgiveness can have no limit. Forgiveness is just too essential to transformation to be capped.

Except Jesus doesn't put that way, exactly. Instead, he shares the parable we've just read about a servant who owes a king a huge debt... a debt of 10,000 talents to be precise. But get this. It would take a laborer back in Jesus' day over 15 years... over 15 years to earn just one talent. So just one talent equaled 15 years' worth of earnings. And this guy owed the king 10,000 talents. It'd be like you or me owing a loan shark 100 billion dollars. It's a ridiculous debt to owe... and a ridiculous debt to forgive.

But when the servant falls on his knees and begs for mercy, that's what the king does... forgiving the entire debt... all 10,000 talents.

Can you imagine what that would that feel like? Can you picture what such a gift of forgiveness would do to you?

¹ Gilberto Collazo in Pastoral Perspective article on Romans 14: 1-12 in *Preaching on the Word : Year A Volume 4*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 64.

But as Jesus tells the story, even though the servant was forgiven his debt, he went out to collect on a loan from someone who owed him not 10,000 talents, but just 100 measly coins. Yet when that guy begged the servant for mercy, he grabbed him by the throat and had him thrown into prison.

The hypocrisy of the servant is evident. And Jesus' message is clear. Without grace at the center of lives as well as the center of our community, we just end up hurting each other.

It's why Jesus says forgiveness can't be measured—it can't be limited. For he knows, when we live by grace... we uncover its power to change the one forgiven... to touch and transform the one who receives it.

I suspect we can all remember a moment when we desperately needed and received forgiveness. Perhaps from a parent... a spouse... a child... a friend... a boss... a stranger. Someone who gave you grace when you didn't expect it... didn't deserve it... and it shaped you. Can you remember what that felt like? How it felt to be set free by another's gift of grace?

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In this light, we can see that forgiveness is a gift, each and every time it's given. It is a gift given when the one who has been wronged says, "I will no longer hold your sin against you." After all, that's the real meaning of forgiveness, right? Quite literally, it means to let go of the other. To release the one who wronged from your condemnation. "To cease to feel resentment against an offender."²

Certainly, the wrongful behavior remains condemned, but no longer the person.

It's a gift one gives to another. But like so many gifts in this world, we often find forgiveness is easier to receive than to give. It's why disciples who are called

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forgive>

to do unto others as we would have others do unto us struggle with not doing unto others as they've already done unto us.

It's why we often get a sort of perverse satisfaction from seeking or sometimes merely fantasizing about revenge. Whether we're dealing with an enemy, a former friend, or even a family member, all too often we want to make another suffer the way they made us suffer.

So we resist forgiveness, at least until the one who hurt us comes to make amends for what happened. It's up to them, we say. We rationalize that we'll forgive them one day... once they've earned our grace.

But how many times does that actually happen? How often do the folks who hurt us turn around and apologize?

This is why Jesus emphasizes our call to forgive is NOT dependent upon others asking us for forgiveness. For Jesus understood... forgiveness is *not* simply important for the one who receives it... Forgiveness is also essential... essential... for the one who gives it.

Listen again to what forgiveness is: a release of the person who wronged us from our condemnation... a release of the person who wronged us from our wishing evil against them... from our desire for revenge... from our need to punish them to make up for what they did to us. To forgive another is to release them from that, **and to release ourselves from needing all that.**

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Now, please hear me emphatically share another vital aspect of forgiveness. To forgive someone... to release someone from our judgment or condemnation is not the same thing as condoning what they did. To forgive the one who hurt you does NOT mean that you should return to what was an unhealthy situation where violence or abuse of any kind occurred.

So please understand that while you can forgive someone who abused you... that doesn't mean the abuse should be permitted to continue. So if you or someone

you know is living in the context of abuse—spousal, child, or otherwise—the first step to health and wholeness is getting out. Removing yourself or the one you know from the context of abuse... Period!

Forgiveness is not permission for others to do whatever they want.

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Rather, as the great spiritual director Marjorie Thompson says so well, when we forgive another who wounded us, we “make a conscious choice to... leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem... (So) Forgiveness means the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.”³ Forgiveness means our wound’s power to hold us trapped... is broken!

For when we refuse to forgive, we not only condemn the one who hurt us, but we also continue to hold onto that hurt. It’s why grudges never lead to healing or wholeness. Only forgiveness does that... only forgiveness sets the other from our condemnation, while setting ourselves free from the resentment and bitterness from holding onto that pain.

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Charlottee Dudley Cleghorn tells a story of a conversation shared by two former prisoners of war. They were gathered at an Army reunion, and sharing old stories.

She overheard one of the POW’s ask another, “Have you forgiven your captors yet?”

“Oh, I will never do that as long as I live,” he responded.

“Then they still have you in prison, don’t they?” the first one replied.

Friends, forgiveness is essential to transformation—personal and communal. It’s why the gift of forgiveness is such a powerful means of making a difference

³ Marjorie Thompson, “Moving toward Forgiveness,” *Weavings*, March-April 1992, 19 as noted in *ibid*.

both within and around us! So let's use it... and let's show this world the joy to be found in living according to God's grace. Amen.