**Sermon for September 17, 2023 Matthew 18. 21-25 “Mandatory Mercy”**

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, `Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, `Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, `Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, `You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Forgiveness. It is the cornerstone of any successful human relationship; and judging by today’s text, the cornerstone of our relationship with God, too. The meaning is clear as can be; If God can forgive us our great indebtedness, we should rise to the occasion and forgive one another the relatively small debts we owe one another. In varying amounts, we end up in each other’s debt just by living and sharing space on this planet. Forgiveness – by any measure a bedrock thing, a foundational thing.

Which is probably why so much time is devoted to it in Jesus’ teaching, and such fine students as Peter are charged with setting the ball in motion. Poor Peter…he just wants to get it right. He’s a fisherman, an ordinary Joe, not too sure about all this temple mumbo-jumbo. He’s heard about forgiveness, of course, so in the new, evolving religious experience that he and a few others are having with Jesus, he asks right out just how much of this forgiveness stuff is required. He starts high, hoping his generosity will be noted. As many as seven times, Lord? Imagine his stunned, slack-jawed face when Jesus says glibly, oh no, seventy-seven times! Some of our bibles say seventy times seven, making it even worse…but however the numbers get translated, Jesus point is the same – the forgiveness he is calling for is essentially limitless, way beyond anything previously suggested by the law and the prophets.

Let’s remember now, his was not a very forgiving culture. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, justice and vengeance kind of rolled together most of the time. Tough old desert mystics like Moses and Isaiah, meeting God on mountains or in visions, fire and smoke and awe. Not a lot of wiggle room for forgiveness or mercy in a religion like theirs. But now Jesus has come along, and suggested – no, *demanded* – a widening of their thinking. No more revenge, no more jealous rage in God’s name, and mercy comes to the front of the line. Mercy that is not optional, but mandatory. And despite record numbers of folks who feel free to re-define that word to suit their own needs, it refuses to be manipulated. Jesus calls his followers to mandatory mercy.

Peter is still standing there with his jaw in his lap, so Jesus launches into one of his famous stories. This one has a king who wants to settle his accounts with his servants. The bank of Dad is calling in its loans. And first up today is this unfortunate fellow who owes – ready? – ten thousand bags of gold. More than a lifetime’s wages, impossible to repay. And so the king, regretfully but resolutely, suggests the usual solution for that time – the man and his family and all his stuff will be sold, into slavery or into hock, and the king will get at least partial settlement. Seems fair, but not too pleasant, and the man pleads for more time, just a little more time, and I will repay you, he wails.

But here’s the thing – he’s sincere, but still untruthful. His desire to pay is far exceeded by his inability to actually earn that vast sum. The king knows…just like a parent knows, or a friend knows, or a pastor knows when strangers lurch through the office doors. The promise of repayment is easy to make, but hard to keep. But this fellow…there’s something in his heart that appeals to his master, and so he lets him off the hook. No selling the family, and guess what? No more debt, either. Clean slate! I don’t have nearly that amount of indebtedness, but I tell you what, if I got that kinda clean slate, I would be doing the happy dance. Most people would, right? Even this guy, probably, but we will never know, because he is on his way to tell his wife the good news, when he stumbles into a friend who borrowed some money a few months back.

Now, if the Hallmark channel were making this movie, the servant would be gushing with gratitude, and forgive the debt of the friend, but that version was still many centuries in the future. Instead, he grabs his pal by the throat and demands payment, and when it isn’t forthcoming, off to jail the second debtor goes, till all is paid, which is basically never, then; cause you can’t work from jail. The other servants in the plaza witness this, some of them probably film it on their IPhones, and they are just appalled, and that kind of feeling doesn’t store well. Soon enough they tell the king, and he calls the original servant in for a little ‘come-to-Jesus meeting. And the king lines it out for him, and he moves his lips big. And the immortal point is that mercy was shown, in great volume, and *that* should merit mercy being shown in return, not to the king, but to others. Our modern concept of ‘paying it forward’ isn’t so new at all, yes? The ruler’s rage is so complete that he throws this wretch into jail to be tortured until it is all paid, which will be never. Death by torture…lovely. Talk about learning mercy the hard way! And Jesus breezily sums it up; this is what God will do to you if you don’t forgive your neighbor from your heart.

Many of you have bumped into the thinking and writings of the late Bishop Spong, one of the progressive church’s clearest voices. He would have a God who behaved that way declared un-worship-able. This is where the modern Christians first big problem comes in this story, not with all the melodrama and exaggeration, but with the God who can get angry enough to torture people to death, and the Son who seems pretty okay with that. But I have to emphasize, it raised no eyebrows in Jesus’ day; they were familiar with God as depicted in what we call the Old Testament, that wily, violent, desert chieftain who lays waste to all in his path. A warrior God for a warrior people, a God made in *their image* of what a God should be, arrgg. And a big part of why Jesus came among us, we think, was to correct that imagery, to show and tell people what God was *really* like. He was doing so well, depicting the king as oh so merciful, generous, kind. So maybe this final description is just more dramatic icing to drive the point home. Cause we’re not here to serve and worship a merciless, overreactive God, are we?

And yet…this forgiveness thing is still a problem for us. How we hate to capitulate, how we hate to cave in and give people slack, let them off the hook. I think this is for two main reasons; we still aren’t sure about the nature of God, and we don’t really understand forgiveness. Those two unsurenesses lead us to follow the wrong role models when it comes to forgiveness, and end up…well, where we are right now.

It’s funny…in 34 years in ministry and 60 years in church, I have *never* had anybody come up to me and say, you know, Pastor Dave, the way God is described in the Old Testament, that’s the God for me. Strong and violent and unfair and punitive, that’s what I want to give my life to. That never happens; what I hear all the time, though, is folks who want to follow this God of love and grace and peace. But the size of that love and grace and peace is so vast that it feels like it can’t be really true, like maybe we messed up someplace. Maybe we should hold back a bit, we think, be more moderate in our forgiveness, more judicious in our grace-giving. We can’t just give away the farm, right? And in our unease with following the God whose love is without perimeter, we ally ourselves with role models who just don’t measure up.

The second stumbling block is our freesia-scented understanding of forgiveness. Starting from the merciless violence of the past, we have pushed the pendulum too far the other way, creating a variety of forgiveness that is both un-biblical and unattainable, and then are astounded when we can’t be as forgiving as we want to be. Let me say it plain and unvarnished; in the biblical tradition, forgiveness has to do with not taking revenge. That’s it. You have revenge due you; you have been offended, or inconvenienced, or cheated somehow. But though you have some coming, you decide to let it go, you decide to give it a pass. That’s forgiveness in the bible; the intentional foregoing of revenge. It’s not about forgetting; it’s not about feeling all warm and cuddly towards the person you are forgiving; it is a moral choice to take the high road. It is a decision not to cash in your chips, even when everybody else seems to be.

Your own Church Council got to practice this kind of forgiveness fairly recently…do you remember, probably ten years ago now, we had a break-in at the church, broken window in the kitchen, lots of blood everywhere where the intruder injured himself entering, a white sofa drenched in blood and made unusable, serious carpet cleaning in the lounge? Well, as the detective said when he called the office when the case had been solved, nobody can escape the witness of their own blood. DNA testing revealed the intruders identity; he is currently incarcerated in Susanville on some other charges. The detective called to ask whether or not we wanted to pursue this, to press charges, and Rich ran it by the council. We decided to forgive, in the biblical sense. We decided not to take our pound of flesh. We are not all warm and fuzzy towards this guy; if he walked in here next week we would not jump all over ourselves to invite him home for lunch. But we chose to forego our revenge…biblical forgiveness in its purest form.

All this talk of prison and torture should not get overlooked, either. Because grudge-holding, heart-closing unforgiveness becomes a prison, and can become tortuous, too. That is one thing that our shelves and shelves of self-help books got right; when we forgive, we liberate ourselves. New life can come, then; not just for us, but for those who have been forgiven. We can create a space for others to improve their lives. We can offer that chance to begin again that is of more value than any indebtedness.

Finally, it is another example of God’s ever-present sense of ironic humor that this text comes before just after our time of national mourning and remembrance. Twenty-two years ago our world changed forever, and though we still don’t agree completely on all the details, we are unanimous in thinking that a tragedy unfolded on our soil, and that thousands of lives were lost that cannot be restored. We were attacked, and we have some justice coming to us. But how we proceed in *demanding* that justice be served will reveal our character. The question before folks who are somehow both patriotic and Christian is an old one: How will we respond? Will we show ourselves little changed in two thousand years, with the unmistakable violence that shows our true colors? Or will we find ways to let things go, creating a space for change through our forgiveness? Will we take Jesus’ command to be merciful seriously enough to overrule our vengeful tendencies? As we mount yet again towards another national election season that will scrape our tender hearts raw, what should our *Christian* perspective be? Are we no better off than when Jesus first walked among us? Do we, like the ungrateful servant, need to learn mercy the hard way? I hope not, and pray we can find new and creative ways to put Jesus’ teachings on mercy and forgiveness into actual practice…Amen.