

## Sermon on Matthew 18:21-35 by Pastor Jon Haug

I want to tell you this one straight. Just like I think it really is. This parable from Jesus is on the immense and almost inconceivable capacity of God to forgive human sin. A slave is forgiven a massive debt from a king, and then goes and holds a minor debt over a fellow slave. It shows us clearly how often we humans can be two-faced, incongruous, and ungrateful. There it is.

But let me take you back a minute, to what a parable even is as we heard one here in the gospel of Matthew today. It's worth reminding you that parables are not real life events. They never happened. There were no witnesses. They are made up. They are imaginative stories intended to teach a lesson or provoke an idea. So Jesus makes up a story here to elicit some meaning, in this case about forgiveness and mercy.

There's a few of these parables, especially the ones with kings, if I'm honest, that I wish Jesus had thought through all the way before the telling. That's to say I think something gets lost in the translation of culture, time, and the understanding of parables and how to read the Bible that all gets a little confusing for readers today who directly equate the king of this parable with God, since the king at the end of this parable tortures a slave. You can discern meaning from this parable without having to reconcile the king's behavior because this king's behavior is not exactly God's. Again it's a story to evoke an idea or meaning. It didn't really happen. And ultimately this story is about forgiveness and mercy.

So what is forgiveness really and why does it matter so much that Jesus makes up a story to get at it in a deeper way? We all know those minor forgivenesses, like what we make children do. If my kids have a fight, often after the anger has subsided a bit, we bring them back together for an apology. One says I'm sorry, with varying degrees of sincerity, and the other says it's ok, with similar varying degrees of sincerity, and we move on with our day. I sense this isn't even the best way to deal with forgiveness, but it is a pattern repeated in countless homes and families.

But how do we deal with really big hurts? What about the wounds that cut deeper. Humans have an unlimited capacity to injure and inflict pain. What about these? What about the deep betrayals of trust, murder, beatings, rape, robbery, identity theft, adultery, hatred, bullying, vicious speech, neglect, abandonment, spitting in someone's face, terrorist attacks, cutting off all communication from someone, the first time your heart was broken, what about then?

What if your siblings sold you into slavery, wishing you dead out of jealousy? Could you forgive them then? Joseph did, amazingly, but only because of his faith in God. Years after his brothers gave him up for dead, and after their father's funeral, his brothers fear Joseph may now finally get his revenge. Fearing, they write him, trying to convince him otherwise. But Joseph is moved by something deeper, by the dream he had of old and the dream he's had his whole life--that God is calling him to something big with his brothers. And he senses this is the moment. Moved to tears at their reuniting, as are his brothers, Joseph says, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."

To be able to say God intended it for good in the face of such awful and devastating treatment by his brothers may seem simplistic or even bother some with a certain sense of justice, but it is through his faith in God over his lifetime, that Joseph is able to offer mercy. It's an amazing moment of forgiveness and reconciliation.

What if someone you loved, a sibling was murdered, by someone who really should have known better? Could you forgive then? Surely no one could right? But that's just what Brandt Jean did. His brother Botham, a black man, was murdered by Amber Guyger, a white former Dallas police officer, who entered what she thought was her apartment, but was wrong, and in the confusion, shot and killed her neighbor Botham Jean. Brandt Jean, Botham's brother, got his moment in court to speak directly to Amber. I can't imagine the family pain, confusion, and desire for justice if not revenge, not to mention the racism underlying the crime. How could you ever get over this kind of loss? What would he tell his brother's murderer?

I'll let you to see it for yourself: [Insert Video Here].

I've heard it said that, "Justice is getting what you deserve, Mercy is not getting what you deserve, and Grace is getting what you don't deserve." Brandt offered this kind of grace to Amber in a court of law in an unforgettable moment, telling his brother's murderer that he personally wants the best for her, and the best would be for her to give her life to Christ. Wow!

This case is filled with all kinds of complex feelings, racial, and otherwise, there's no denying that. Amber was sentenced to jail, as

she should have been. But the grace Brandt showed Amber is the kind of grace and compassion God offers all people, no matter the color of their skin or the crime they've committed, and it's the kind of grace we ought to model our lives and systems after, from courtrooms, to family living rooms.

Christ offers you this kind of grace, forgiving the biggest debt you have. Jesus wants the best for you. So you have a choice. You can choose to hold grudges, you can choose to get what you deserve, you can choose to not forgive them until they apologize first, you can choose bitterness and resentment, and you can hold your power over others. Or you can accept the gift of faith in Christ calling you to more, calling you to try and pass on a glimmer of the forgiveness and mercy offered you in Jesus.

It's a pandemic, fires are raging around us, the very air is hazardous at times, a tense election is coming. Isn't it time to think about picking up the phone this week and making that call to the person you know you should? Write that letter. Send that email. Because grace is not an accounting business. Grace, God's kind of grace, is free--it heals, it mends, it restores community, it transforms YOU. Forgiveness, grace, and mercy is offered to you this day. So forgive...and do it from your heart. AMEN.

God's forgiveness and mercy are beyond our capability.

God's Work, Our Hands Sunday

Mia Hill's baptism

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 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. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 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.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 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. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

First Reading

Genesis 50:15-21

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' 19 But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

What keeps us from offering compassion and mercy to others when we have received it from Christ at the cross?

Cobra Kai: Karate Kid

King Cobra striking to kill a pregnant female

Dolly Parton forgave that man

True love is not an accountant's work; that kills love and intimacy

a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103:8).

"Nevertheless, forgiveness is at the core of our call to Christian discipleship. It is at the core of the Christian Gospel itself. The Gospel is not simply "God loves everyone." (Though that is true, it is too facile an understanding of the Gospel.) The Gospel is "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" And "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:17, 19). The Gospel is "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:11-12). So, as witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we proclaim not just that God loves, but that in Christ, God forgives and reconciles and makes new. And we live that out in our lives by forgiving those who have sinned against us." Kathryn Schifferdecker is Professor and Elva B. Lovell Chair of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. Ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2001, Schifferdecker was associate pastor for five years at Trinity Lutheran Church, Arkdale, Wis., before coming to Luther.