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Sermon: “Transformative Forgiveness”

Preached September 14, 2008

Dundee United Methodist Church

Text: Matthew 18: 21-35 (NRSV)

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, the Apostle Peter poses a question to Jesus: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” In effect, Jesus is saying that there is no limit to forgiveness. We never get to a point where we say, “Enough! I will *never* forgive you again.” Why? Because this is not the way that God treats us. Since God generously forgives us without keeping score, we who receive God’s forgiveness should generously forgive others without keeping score. In fact, God’s forgiveness is not something we can truly receive without being fundamentally changed from the inside out.

I would like us to consider two stories this morning as we reflect on the question: What kind of a person do I want to be? The first story we will consider is the parable of the unforgiving servant that was read earlier, and it paints a picture of the kind of person that God does *not* want us to be. The second is a contemporary story of forgiveness between a father and a son that illustrates the kind of person that God *does* want us to be.

Hear again the account of the unforgiving servant. As the story begins, we learn of a ruler who decides to settle his accounts with some of the people who work for him. First, he deals with a man who owes him an outrageous sum of money: 10,000 talents. In order to see the enormity of this debt, it is helpful to consider that King Herod’s annual operating budget was only 900 talents! So this man owed more than ten times what King Herod had at his disposal to run his region of the Roman Empire for a year. Jesus is trying to make clear that this debt is impossible to pay, much like the debt incurred by our sin. After the ruler orders that all this man’s property be sold and that his family be sold into slavery, the servant falls on his knees and begs for more time to pay his debt. Surprisingly, the ruler has compassion on the servant and gives more than is requested. He does not simply offer the servant more time to pay off the debt, but completely forgives the debt!

Shortly thereafter, this same servant encounters a man who owes him 100 denarii. One denarius was an ordinary day’s wage. So this was a substantial but payable debt, unlike the 10,000 talents the first servant owed, which was equal to 50 million denarii! Immediately the first servant becomes stern and demands repayment. The second servant falls on his knees and begs for more time to pay the debt. But instead of showing the same mercy he had received from the ruler, the first servant orders the second servant to be thrown into jail until his family is able to work off his debt.

Eventually the ruler gets wind of the first servant’s greedy actions. Confronting the ungenerous man he asks a pointed question: “ought you not to have shown mercy to your fellow servant just as I have showed mercy to you?” Then he condemns the first servant to be tortured until his debt is paid in full. Jesus concludes the telling of this story by saying, “That is how my Heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts.”

This story is easier to hear if we treat it as a children’s fable that illustrates a commonly accepted moral principle—be forgiving. Indeed, this story does help reinforce Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” But the real power of this story is lost if we use it to distill a truism in the sterilized language of moral precepts. It is

also easier to hear this story if we focus on another person, perhaps someone we don't like, imagining them to be the unforgiving servant and getting their due. But the story gains its real force when we read it as if looking into a mirror. When have we acted like the unforgiving servant? When have we refused to let someone off the hook who has offended us, despite the fact that God has forgiven (and continues to forgive) our most entrenched sin? We must squarely face the question: Do I want to be like the unforgiving servant?

If we are going to be genuinely Christian then the answer must be “No,” because the desire and ability to forgive is “a Christian's birthmark—a sign that we have been born anew spiritually. To be a Christian is to be forgiven. To be a Christian is also to be someone who forgives.”¹ When we claim the name of Jesus and act like the unforgiving servant then we dishonor God and lie to ourselves.

Now let us consider a second story, one of awakening, forgiveness, and reconciliation, one that gives us a glimpse of the kind of person that God *wants* us to be.²

Once there was a man who was old and sick. He called his only son to his bedside and said, “I know that I was not the best father when you were growing up, but I had a poor example from my father. He was more interested in making money than spending time with me. Before he died he asked for my forgiveness, and I gave it to him. However, I made the same mistake with you. I spent too much time working long hours and not enough time with you. Now I am old and sick and I am asking you as my father asked of me: Will you please forgive me? Unlike my father, I do not want you to wait until I die to share in all that I have. I can no longer run my business, but you and your wife are capable. I will give you my business now, and all that I ask is that you take care of me until I die.”

His son nodded, not sharing what was in his heart. He and his wife moved into his father's house and took the finest room for themselves, moving the old man to a small and sparse bedroom in the back of the house. Little by little, they took more and more away from the old man. They sold his fine clothes, cherished books, and most valuable possessions and kept the money for themselves. The old man wore rags, and because they were ashamed of him they made him stay in his room when people came for visits and parties. Eventually, they moved the old man into the barn where he slept in a corner in his old rags. Soon the man and his wife even forgot the old man was alive.

But their son did not forget about his grandfather. Every day after school the boy would sneak into the barn to spend time with the old man. The grandfather held the boy close and told him stories, never saying a negative word about his parents. But the boy sometimes played alone because his father rarely spent time with his son. One day as the father was rushing off to work he noticed the child moving rags and blankets from one pile to another.

“What are you doing?” asked the father.

“Well,” said the son, “I take some fine blankets from the house and put them in one pile. I take dirty rags and put them in another.”

“Why do you play this game?” asked the father.

¹ Brad Braxton, “What to Do When You've Been Messed Over,” *30 Good Minutes* (December 16, 2007), http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/braxton_5110.htm.

² The following story is adapted from “The Forgiving Ruler and the Unforgiving Servant,” *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: The Parables of Jesus*, Dennis E. Smith and Michael E. Williams, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 71-72. I paraphrase the story as it is recorded in this text, but add new ending in order to make the point that forgiveness is an ongoing task for the Christian.

“Oh, I am practicing for when I am a man like you. I will have these very fine, warm blankets, and I will save these dirty rags, like the ones grandfather has, for you.”

The man immediately realized how he had mistreated his father and set a poor example for his son. With tears in his eyes the father swept his son into his arms and went to find his father in the barn. He begged, “Father please forgive me. I have been so selfish.” The old man forgave him without hesitation. Weeping, they all returned to the house. Once inside a question began to gnaw on the son’s mind, and so he asked, “Father, how was it that you could forgive me so quickly without a trace of bitterness or reservation?” With tender eyes, the father replied, “I did not wait for you to come asking for forgiveness before I offered it. Rather, every time you took something from me and pushed me farther away I remembered my own wrong doing toward you and asked God to forgive me as I forgave you. Every time you mistreated me I surrendered the hostility and negativity to God and showed you the compassion that I hoped one day you would show me.”

We all start out like the unforgiving servant and the son who mistreats his father. We all start out as those in need of forgiveness. But when we experience God’s forgiveness it should transform us into generous forgivers. When we come face to face with the ugliness of our wrong doing and feel its unbearable weight on our shoulders, and then experience—really experience—God’s forgiveness and release from guilt, then we realize that we must forgive others who have hurt us and make amends for the things we have done to hurt others. The reconciliation accomplished by God *for us* is intended to lead to reconciliation *between us*, and God does this by changing us from blind and bitter score keepers to generous and free forgivers.

Who do you want to be this morning? Do you want to be like the unforgiving servant of the first story, who refuses to show the same mercy he had received? Or do you want to be like the father in the second story that realizes his own wrong doing, seeks forgiveness, and then generously forgives in return? Jesus is clear: as those who have been forgiven, we must also forgive; just as God generously forgives us without keeping score, we should generously forgive others without keeping score. To be a Christian means to be forgiven. We usually get this much right. But to be a Christian also means to be a person who generously forgives. Listen to Jesus: Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful. Amen.