

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 5, 2023

Matthew 18:23-35

Friends, as we begin this season of Lent together, as we did on Ash Wednesday and now our first Sunday of worshiping together this first Sunday of Lent, we are beginning a new worship series that will carry us through the season. We've entitled it Parables that Prepare Us. So what we know is that Jesus's favorite teaching tool was a parable, and so we'll get to hear one this morning—The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. What we believe is that in each of these parables that we'll explore over the next six weeks, Jesus has something to teach us. Jesus also has something to do to prepare us for the receiving of the Paschal mystery—that is that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. So this day we read from the Gospel of Matthew, the 18th chapter, verses 23-35. You can follow along. You can grab the Pew Bible and follow along or on your phone, wherever it is you keep your Bible, and we can listen together for God's word to each of us and the church.

‘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.’

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Forgiveness is perhaps the most repeated theme in Jesus's teaching. Biblical scholars tell us that about two-thirds of the teachings of Jesus speak directly or indirectly to the mystery of

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forgiveness. It's one of the things that Jesus comes back to often. Perhaps you all might remember that I had intended to preach on forgiveness about four weeks ago now and decided to delay that until this morning, but that passage that I was going to preach that morning was from Matthew 6. It's familiar to us because it is the passage from which the Lord's Prayer comes. So we're used to going to that passage and finding the Lord's Prayer, this way that Jesus lays out for us how it is we are to pray. That's important, it's good, it's a wonderful practice, even in Lent as we begin a practice of prayer together; but we miss something if we don't continue to read past verse 13. That's the end of the Lord's Prayer in chapter six. Verse 14 brings something else to us. Jesus continues just after the prayer, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses."

Jesus has just laid out for the disciples how it is they are to pray. And the only theme that he comes back to is the theme of forgiveness. He could have decided to re-emphasize any of the themes within that prayer, but he comes back to forgiveness. He describes this relationship of what it looks like to forgive and to be forgiven, what it looks like to withhold forgiveness and therefore have forgiveness withheld from us. It sounds really causal. We'll get to that in a second. Just before this passage we read in Matthew 18, Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you 77 times."

And he goes on to tell of this parable that we just read. I appreciate Jesus's emphasis on forgiveness. I think it's an important message for us to hear over and over again, not only our need for it, but our practice of it. But what I don't appreciate is that Jesus doesn't explicitly talk about how hard of a practice forgiveness is. Forgiveness is hard work if we take it seriously. It is the hard work of unbinding ourselves and others. But I want to posit to you this morning that the alternative to forgiveness, the withholding of forgiveness, is just as difficult if not more so on us, because when we do not forgive, when we withhold it, we carry around the weight of our own hurt and pain. I think that's part of what Jesus is actually trying to get to after the Lord's Prayer and also here at the end of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. I think part of what he's trying to allude to is maybe not so much a quid pro quo relationship in forgiveness, but, more so, the way in which we extend forgiveness is only the same measure as how much we understand we've received it ourselves. We really can't understand what it means to be or what it means to forgive someone else if we haven't reckoned with the forgiveness that we need.

If we don't think that we actually need it, it's not as valuable.

Now, as Presbyterians, every week when we gather for worship, we have a whole sequence we call the confessional sequence. During the season of Lent it's even extended for us. We're singing Kyrie in the midst of that, and we're spending a little bit of time together. We do a communal prayer and then we have a silent prayer as well. That's supposed to be for each of us to have space to reckon with the ways in which we have strayed from the will of God, the ways in which we have imparted hurt and pain on others. That's what we're supposed to do. But I noticed something about a month ago. This morning we're in Lent and so we have this eight page

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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bulletin but if y'all were here during January and February, we had a four-page bulletin. Right? We were conserving paper.

It was interesting because the prayer of confession would fit on the front page, and then uh and then we'd have in parentheses like we do here, Silent Confession, and then we'd have underneath that a bold heading Assurance of Pardon. But interestingly enough, every time I stood there for the months of January and February, and we went through and we prayed our prayer of confession, we got to that parenthetical part, I heard a whole lot of this (sound of crumpling paper) people turning the bulletin instead of praying silently and confessing. We're going to go back to four-page bulletins during Eastertide, and you're going to notice the sound.

To be honest, y'all were distracting me from what I was trying to confess. But it's a real thing. We think we're moving to the next part of worship, there's more to come— Assurance of Pardon and it's coming soon, but there's a whole space where we are supposed to actually claim the way in which we have wounded others. We have grieved God.

If we don't understand the depth of the forgiveness we need, we really are not going to appreciate what it means to extend forgiveness to another, because when we don't forgive, we carry around the weight of our hurt and our pain. It reminds me of that myth of Sisyphus, y'all are probably familiar with it, this one who is destined to push this heavy boulder up a hill over and over and over again. That reminds me or makes me think about what it means to carry around our hurt and our pain, the things that we're holding against someone else.

Forgiveness, to me, in this mythology is God coming along and tapping Sisyphus on the shoulder and saying, "Let go of the rock." As long as you're still pushing it, it owns you, it helps define who you are, because you're deciding to continue to engage in this.

Here's the thing. The miraculous thing that happens is that when we do the hard work of forgiveness, something happens. "When you forgive," John O'Donohue says, "When you forgive", something deeper, "some deeper, divine generosity takes over. When you can forgive, then you are free. When you cannot forgive, you are a prisoner of the hurt done to you.... Only the grace of forgiveness can break the straight logic of hurt and embitterment. It gives you a way out because it places the conflict on a completely different level. In a strange way it keeps the whole conflict human. You begin to see and understand the conditions, the circumstances, or the weakness that made another act as they did", and maybe, even, you get to see the conditions, the circumstances, and the weaknesses within you that make you act how you act.

A dear friend of mine's mom battled alcoholism her whole life. My friend carried anger and resentment towards her mother for a really long time until she found out she was pregnant. It was a girl.

She said, "If I'm going to be a mother, the mother I want to be, I need to forgive my mom." So she wrote her a letter. They were estranged. She wasn't quite sure if the address that she had was the address where her mom was, but she gave me permission to share it with you this morning.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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“Mom, I’ve spent a lot of my life angry and resentful about your alcoholism and a lot of the choices that you have made. I feel like much of my life has been formed by your disease, and I’ve had to work hard to recover myself from it. But next week I’m having a baby girl, and I don’t want to carry this weight anymore, not for me, not for her, and not for you either. So I want you to know that I forgive you. I forgive you for all of it, and I’m going to try to remember each day the many wonderful things you gave me. You taught me to love to read. You made sure that I got to go to the library as much as I wanted. You taught me to love a good cup of tea, and I will remember that on Saturday mornings you would make a pot of tea just for us, no brothers allowed. You taught me to love good music. There’s a soundtrack of my childhood that I love still. There are so many things big and small that I remember. I can only hope that one day this baby girl within me will do the same for me—forgive me for my failings and remember the goodness of our life together. I love you, Mom.”

She sent the letter off, and a few weeks passed, and nothing.

Then a call from an unknown number, and the voice on the other end of the line was the woman who gave her birth, and she just said a simple question. “Did you mean it?” And through tears my friend said, “I did,” and her mom hung up.

She said, “I realized in that moment that I was free from it. I couldn’t change the way that my mother’s life had impacted me, so I changed how I allowed it to define my identity; and I’m grateful that I was desperate enough because I was having a daughter to let the Holy Spirit soften me into forgiveness.

Beloved, we have to ask for grace to let go of those grudges and those hurts that we cling to, or how else are we going to be free?

The good news, the good news that we get to claim this day is that the kingdom of God is like that gracious, gracious king and lord, whose first inclination and even final one is forgiveness. It strikes me that there were a whole bunch of people who were going to come before the lord that day, lord little l, and the very first one that did he forgives all of the debt. You imagine what the people in the line behind him were thinking. He did it in front of everybody.

The challenge of course is for us to be bold enough, courageous enough, vulnerable enough to go within to wrestle with the person or the situation that is in need of forgiveness. I’ll be honest with you. A month ago I didn’t feel very authentic as I prepared. I even came in here on a Sunday morning, I think I told y’all that the Lord did something right before I got into the pulpit, changed the sermon completely. But I didn’t feel great about it because I didn’t have in my mind something recent—a person or a situation that I had had to forgive. I hadn’t practiced forgiveness. So I felt like I was coming into the pulpit a little empty. And so a few weeks ago, as I began to wrestle with that, I asked God to reveal to me a person or a situation that needed forgiveness in my life, that needs forgiveness in my life. Zero out of ten, I would not recommend y’all doing that, okay?

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, March 5, 2023

Because it was really soon, it was really soon after I asked for that opportunity, that I had the occasion of crossing paths with someone who had deeply wounded me and deeply wounded people that I love. I hadn't seen their face in a while, so when I passed by them on my way to work, my stomach just dropped. Maybe you have somebody like that. All of the feelings of hurt and grief, they rushed back in. I could feel it in my entire body, top of my head sweaty. Everything I experienced came right back to me, so I gritted my teeth, and I just walked on past. I thought, "Whew, that's done with."

Later that week it happened again, and then again, and then I realized that there was this pattern that this person was in, and I needed to make a decision. Our patterns had synced up in a way I was very uncomfortable with, so I could choose to simply take another route and avoid them all together. That's what I had resolved to do until I was sitting in that chair right there not too long ago, and the Lord said, "That's not what you should do. You can't avoid the hurt or the pain. You can't avoid the person either. You've got to keep your route, but you've got to implement a new practice. So how about this? Every time you cross paths with this person again, I want you to say within yourself, not audibly, not to this person, "I forgive you." That's it. "I forgive you."

So I tried it, and it sounds silly, but it's exactly what I needed to do. I'm doing it every time I see this person. I forgive you. I'm saying it over and over and over again. I forgive you for the hurt. I forgive you for the pain. I forgive you for the embarrassment. I forgive you for the way in which you inflicted pain on others. I forgive you. If I'm being honest, I do not believe it yet, y'all, but I'm hopeful that I'll get there. I believe and I trust that at some point I'll walk by this person and my stomach won't drop, and I won't get sweaty, and I won't be angry anymore, because I will have allowed myself to have my shoulder tapped and allowed the voice of God to say, "Leave the rock. Walk away."

Here's what else happened when I started practicing that. I realized I'm someone's person too. Someone walks by me and their stomach drops. I don't know what I've done to them. I don't know who they are. Maybe they're, maybe you're here this morning, but I realize I'm someone's person too. I'm someone that is in need of forgiveness too. I've, I've noticed that my posture has changed in this whole practice of forgiveness. Richard Rohr's words have begun to resonate with me more and more. When he said, "If we don't get forgiveness, we're missing the whole mystery. We're still living in a world of meritocracy," of quid pro quo (I was going to flip over that at some point, yeah) "quid pro quo thinking, a performance and behavior that earns us a reward. Forgiveness is the great thawing," Roar says. "of all logic and reason and worthiness. It is the melting into the mystery of God as unearned love, unmerited grace, the humility and the powerlessness of a divine lover." Here's what I don't know. I don't know what person or what situation makes your stomach fall to the floor, makes you get a little sweaty. Maybe they're here this morning, maybe you know exactly who they are, or maybe you might dare to ask God who it is that needs forgiveness in your life. But what I do know is that Jesus, over and over again, two-thirds of the teachings that he presents to us in scripture, it's about this practice right here. It's critical.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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It's critical because it helps us to truly understand what grace means in practice in the world. So I want you to know I'm praying for you. For whoever it is that you envision, whatever situation you have, I pray that you'll find the time in the not too distant future, for the voice of God and the spirit of God softens you, to say I forgive you and to mean it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.