

“A Community of Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

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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 should 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?” 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’  
This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Theologian Debie Thomas put into words this week the discomfort I felt reading this text in a world where demands for the oppressed to forgive their oppressors are so often used to silence their cries for justice.

“First, a confession:,” Thomas says. “I feel ambivalent about writing an essay on forgiveness. Not because I disdain forgiveness, or consider it anything less than essential to the Christian life. But because I’m hyper-aware of how forgiveness is sometimes deployed by Christians to fend off questions about power, justice, repentance, and lament. This is especially true right now in the United States, where the pressing call for racial equality and healing is too often met in the Church by premature demands for forgiveness. Often — and to our shame — we Christians turn the concept of forgiveness into a weapon,” Thomas writes, “and use it to silence people who cry out against injustice.”<sup>1</sup>

So I wondered: How can we speak about this passage in a way that holds with awe and gratitude stories of radical forgiveness between people while refusing to allow those stories to be co-opted and weaponized to demand that the Black community simply forgive white Americans for over 400 years of

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, *JOURNEY WITH JESUS*  
A WEEKLY WEBZINE FOR THE GLOBAL CHURCH, SINCE 2004,  
[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?fbclid=IwAR3fq8Hrdgl5VVvRAGDGJtHQGyJshTpJlvGgfgHQs4tPzIG0HQ\\_xkO80bzk](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?fbclid=IwAR3fq8Hrdgl5VVvRAGDGJtHQGyJshTpJlvGgfgHQs4tPzIG0HQ_xkO80bzk)

systematic oppression? And as I turned this over in my mind, I noticed something in this passage that hadn't jumped off the page in my first reading. I have such an American, individualistic lens when I read the Bible, so it hadn't occurred to me how significant it is that when the king in this parable forgives the debt of the enslaved man, he wasn't just setting that one man free.

Remember, the text says that the enslaved man was about to be sold to pay his debt *along with his wife and children and all their possessions*. So when the man had his slate wiped clean, this impacted his entire family, which I imagine impacted the rest of the community where they lived together, carrying the potential to echo through the coming generations of that family who would no longer need to live under the burden of an unjust financial weight. I wonder if it would have meant that his spouse wouldn't be uprooted from her entire social network and the many who perhaps depended upon her for support in such a communal society. I wonder if it would have meant that the children in the family could continue to find connections in the friendships they had been developing as they grew up without being shipped off to some entirely new place where they had no network of support. As theologian Michael Joseph Brown puts it, "...forgiveness is an act that affects more than just two individuals... life should be understood as interconnected."<sup>2</sup> We cannot think about biblical forgiveness without thinking of its impact on whole families and entire communities.

And this too made me wonder: What would happen if we laid down our white American lens of individualism for a moment and thought more about *whole communities* that practice forgiveness

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Joseph Brown, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Brian K. Blount, General Editor, Fortress Press: 2007, pg. 109.

as a way of life that leads to the thriving of all people? As I mentioned in my sermon last week, our current “justice” system in America is rooted in anything but forgiveness. It is instead focused on punishing those who harm, not restoring them to communities for healing and wholeness. I recently learned more our cash bail system, for example, in which those who are arrested for a crime are only released prior to trial if they are rich enough to meet bail, with people who live in poverty and communities of color - who are already disproportionately targeted by police - sometimes remaining in jail with no charges brought against them simply because they cannot afford freedom. Or think about the prison industrial complex in America, which has grown exponentially in recent years not because of an increase in actual crime, but because of how many corporations and individuals are making a profit by having so many people incarcerated. And even upon release from prison, discriminatory employment practices and so many other forms of societal shaming surround those who are released, making it a herculean task to rebuild a life. In the words of civil rights leader Fania Davis, “Ours is a justice system that harms people who harm people to show that harming people is wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

Part of Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about how much to forgive is a story. Theologian Eric Barreto points out that “Jesus’ parables are rarely simple allegories, wherein characters can be easily attached to God or us in the drama of salvation. Not all kings are stand-ins for God in the parables;” he says, “instead, we may find God in the interstices of these stories as much as in

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<sup>3</sup> Fania Davis, “What Is Justice?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PE6B1N\\_rC8&ab\\_channel=WorldTrustTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PE6B1N_rC8&ab_channel=WorldTrustTV)

their explicit characters.”<sup>4</sup> We might find God bursting through the cracks in the story to show us something new. So what if God is not the king in this story, but rather that moment when an enslaved man is released and his entire financial debt completely forgiven? What if God is in the freedom that could have then reverberated through this man’s entire family and likely their entire village? What if God is in the impulse to see the humanity in those who suffer under oppression and remove the barriers to their thriving? What if God can be found in this parable in the movement of radical release, the canceling of debts, the bursting in of freedom that can lead to communal thriving?

If this is where we find God most clearly in the text, then to me, the real question is - what will we do as witnesses to this movement of release and freedom? We see what happens if we take the grace received and hoard it for ourselves. Like the enslaved man who hardens his heart and seizes the throat of the man who owes him, this hoarding of grace turns us into cogs in the machine of injustice, perpetuating systems like mass incarceration that criminalize financial need, clutching the oppressed by the throat until they cannot breathe, all while the rich get richer. It’s horrifying to hear of a king that tortures a man forever because he decided to hoard the grace he was given, but maybe that’s an accurate description of what happens when a demand for punishment is recycled over and over again. Maybe the torture in this parable is really just that system that “harms people who harm people to show that harming people is wrong.”

But there is another path we can take if we choose. What would happen if we responded to the movement of the Spirit to

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Barreto, *Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35*, September 14th, 2014, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2165](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2165)

release and cancel debts and bring freedom by letting that movement soak through every single thread of the fabric of our society? What if that Spirit of release moved through us in advocacy with our elected officials to pass laws and legislation that don't expand prisons but instead seeks restorative justice, re-connecting folx to communities of support? What if that Spirit of release moved through us to demand that public funding not be invested in policing and criminalizing the oppressed but instead invested in the ingredients for life: housing, healthcare, grassroots organizations led by the people for the people? What if the Spirit of release moved through us to lay down a desire to punish and instead take up God's heart to restore, to make whole, to heal, to support? Perhaps God breaking through in a moment of justice and release and freedom would not be just a moment but a movement. May it be so, and may it begin with us. Amen.