

“Well”,

- I said,

“That person just hasn’t done enough

- to earn my forgiveness.”

- The memory of speaking those words,

- flashed into my head this week

- as I read the parable of the unforgiving servant.

- Now on the surface,

- the statement I made to my friend,

- was absolutely true.

- The person in question -

- had,

- in my opinion,

- not only caused me harm -

- but had also done nothing

- to earn forgiveness

- from me -

- in fact,

- if anything,

- this person had continued to heap

- new offenses upon the old -

- In my mind,

- the debt that was owed

- which may have started as

- the emotional equivalent of 100 denari

- had actually grown in time

- to something more like 10,000 talents.

- So when I said -

- “this person has done nothing to earn forgiveness

- from me.”

- I really meant it - -

- And in that moment,

- the statement felt - - - right -

- I had been wronged.

- I didn't want to forgive the other person.

- I didn't want to believe

- that the other person deserved forgiveness.

- in fact -

- the images that came to mind that day -

- were more along the lines of

- retribution and punishment. -

- As I look back now, - - -

- I can't say that it is a moment in my life that I am particularly proud of

- but at the time,

- it was how I felt -

- and so I can relate to the unforgiving servant -

- that we see in Jesus' parable today -

- I can relate to that moment -

- when he was faced with the opportunity

- to share just a small sampling

- of the forgiveness given to him by his Lord -

- and yet -

- the sin that's a part of all of our lives -

- that tendency we have toward selfishness -

- and self-preservation -

- flares up and causes him to act in a way -

- that seemingly disregards -

- the example of what our Lord -

- has done for us.

- As Paul famously said,

- I find myself doing the very things

- that I don't want to do. - -

- So when I see the servant

- ignoring a plea for mercy -
- the very same plea that had won him forgiveness
- from his Lord -
- I can understand how that happens,
- I think we all can -
- we've all had those moments -
- where frustration,
- or anger, or selfishness gets the best of us -
- in fact,
- I imagine it was one of those moments of frustration,
- or anger with someone else that prompted Peter to ask his question
- of Jesus in the first place -
- Perhaps Peter's friend had borrowed his fishing net
- time and time again -
- always tearing it,
- never repairing it -
- mostly forgetting to say "Thank You"
- always expecting his buddy Peter
- to forgive him - -
- And then perhaps it happen again -
- pushing Peter just a little to far -
- prompting Peter to ask Jesus to condone his anger -

- to affirm for Peter

- that there was a limit

- on forgiveness. - -

- Peter - I think - is looking for a number -

- looking for Jesus to draw

- a clearly defined line -

- to say -

- for example

- 'You must forgive offense number six,

- but once you reach offense seven,

- withholding forgiveness

- is perfectly acceptable.' - -

- When Peter asks -

“Lord, . . . how often should I forgive. As many as seven times?” (Mt 18:21)

- I think he is looking for the type of black and white answer

- that can provide nice cover -

- when one is dealing with something difficult. -

- It's much **easier** to say,

- “I'm sorry you have exceeded your forgiveness limit.

- There is nothing I can do.” -

- It's much harder to say - -

- “I simply don't want to forgive you anymore.”

- But what Jesus does -

- instead of providing a simplistic black and white answer - -

- is to invite Peter and all of us -

- to consider God's graciousness -

- to remember God's ability to forgive

- even the most extraordinary debt -

- an ability to forgive

- that has been demonstrated across the centuries -

- from Adam and Eve being given the chance

- to continue to live

- to the people in the wilderness

- who are healed from the snake bites

- to wayward the Israelites

- being returned home from exile -

- time and time again in the relationship between

- God and God's people -

- the people have turned from God -

- but God has never turned from them - from us. -

- Oh -

- have their been consequences for sinfulness -

- certainly -

- forgiveness doesn't mean that there is no accountability -

- should strive to treat one another
- Now as those words that I spoke to my friend long ago remind me,
 - following God's example -
 - offering forgiveness, - -
 - seeking reconciliation is by no means easy -
 - making peace with hurts and pains -
 - letting go of anger and frustration -
 - realizing that there is no future in holding a grudge
 - is typically easy to say,
 - but hard to do -
 - and when we can do it,
 - it certainly doesn't happen over night -
- But the more we receive the grace of God in our lives
 - the more we understand
 - that God loves us unconditionally,
 - that God forgives us completely,
 - that God's mercy is greater than our ability to sin -
 - the more we discover ways to give in
 - a little less often to the selfishness of sin-
 - and follow Jesus' example a little more fully - -
- the more we come to understand,
 - that ultimately Peter

- was asking the wrong question - - -

- for as children of God

- the question we are called to ask is not

- How often should we forgive?

- but rather -

- “How can I claim God’s forgiveness and love -

- and build on that strength

- to build a whole, healthy life

- filled with forgiveness, love and mercy

- for myself

- and those around me?” -

- For while it is true

- that forgiveness is difficult -

- and it is also true

- that having a hard cap

- on how many times we have to forgive -

- certainly sounds like an easier way forward -

- The overriding truth is that there is no future in

- withholding forgiveness, maintaining a grudge,

- and constantly seeking retribution.

- No - The future for you and for me and for all of God’s children,

- is to claim the good news of God’s love -

- to claim the hope of the empty tomb -
 - to claim the promise of God's grace -
 - God's unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy - -
 - for it is that grace and presence that
 - offer us a way forward
 - even in the most difficult situations -
 - helping us to receive forgiveness,
 - share forgiveness
 - and build whole,
 - healthy relationships
 - in our lives.