

In this Scripture lesson from Matthew, Peter asks Jesus a question about something that has been troubling him. In his world, the standard for reasonable retribution was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. When someone wrongs you, immediately take revenge, which is only fair. But after being around Jesus, Peter is introduced to a higher standard. He suspects that there is a different way to live, and he is curious about it. So when he asks how often he should forgive someone who wrongs him, Jesus immediately says “...endlessly. Never stop forgiving, ever.” Then Jesus goes on to tell a story about an unforgiving servant, a man who had received forgiveness, but would not offer forgiveness in return. The parable of the unforgiving servant reveals the reason why forgiveness is essential to give and to receive. The lesson here has nothing to do with the pursuit of justice, and everything to do with the character of God. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven “...may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” The king begins the reckoning by calling a debtor to appear before him. The man owes him 10,000 talents, which was an insanely large sum of money in those days. A talent is the largest monetary unit of the day, equal to the wages of a manual laborer for 15 years. 10,000 talents would be the wages of 10,000 manual laborers, over the course of 15 years. By comparison, notes biblical scholar Eugene Boring, the annual tax income for all of the territories of Herod the Great was 900 talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of the countries of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria.

So this man is more than knee-deep in debt. He’s over his head, drowning in red ink, sinking like a rock, and many people in our time can identify with that. The king orders the slave to be sold, together with his wife and children and all of his possessions, so that a payment can be made. With nothing left to lose, the slave falls on his knees before the king and says, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Surprisingly, the king shows pity and forgives the entire debt. That’s the kind of God we have, says Jesus — a king who has mercy on us, and who forgives us our debts, expecting us to forgive our debtors in return.

But the story does not end there. That freshly forgiven slave races out of the palace and comes upon a second slave who owes him a hundred denarii — 100 coins, each one equal to the daily wage for a laborer. This amount is a significant sum, for sure, but it’s positively microscopic compared to what the first slave owed the king. The first slave seizes the second slave by the throat and demands that he pay him what he owes. The second slave falls down and pleads with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” “No way,” says the first slave. Not

going to happen. He throws the second slave in prison until the whole debt is paid. Here, the plot thickens. When some bystanders see what has happened, they go ballistic — they run and give the king a full report. The king summons the first slave and says, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. You think that was easy for me? I let you walk away from an enormous debt and showed mercy. Why didn’t you show mercy to your fellow slave, as I did to you?” The slave is speechless.

Then, in his anger, the king delivers him to jail until his debt could be paid in full. Jesus concludes with these words, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister **from your heart.**” There’s an unbreakable bond between the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness we are to offer one another, making it illogical and impossible for us to accept the mercy of the Lord and then refuse to extend mercy to others. Jesus summarizes this quite succinctly in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Forgive us our debts — that’s what we ask of God. As we have forgiven our debtors — that’s what we offer our neighbors. In the divine economy of the kingdom of heaven, you can’t have one without the other.

So, what does all of this mean for us? Well, first of all, forgiveness is not a “get out of jail free” card. You cannot earn it without recognizing and acknowledging the consequences of your actions and take accountability for what you did. And then you must offer that same forgiveness to others who have wronged you. That is why we pray over and over and over again, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Once we experience forgiveness from someone we are then given the inner freedom to give it to others. We must be willing to share the grace that we have received for ourselves, otherwise it is meaningless.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn had reason to be a very bitter angry man after being imprisoned and tortured in the Soviet Gulags under Stalin. He suffered unbearable things simply for honestly communicating the circumstances of Soviet Russia. But Solzhenitsyn was able to forgive his tormentors, and he has a most interesting perspective on forgiveness. He wrote that forgiveness is the thing which distinguishes human beings from animals. Not our capacity to think, or our self awareness, but our capacity to repent and forgive. Only humans can perform what he describes as “...this unnatural act which transcends the relentless laws of nature.” I find that fascinating. Our capacity to forgive makes us Godlike. If we do not transcend this primal instinct to retaliate and cling to hatred, we are no better than the animals and forever enslaved in the grip of those we cannot forgive.

But how do we do that? By viewing those who have wronged us with compassion. Lewis Smedes in his book Forgive and Forget tells a delightful folk fable called “Magic Eyes.” In this fable a man has been betrayed by his wife and finds it impossible to forgive her. But every time he felt hatred toward her, an angel came and dropped a pebble on his heart so that he would feel pain. Every time he felt hatred toward her, his heart ached and he hated her more. The angel came to him one night and told him how he could be healed. He would need the miracle of the Magic Eyes. Only a new way of looking at things could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds he carried. “Nothing can change what has happened,” the man said. “You are right,” said the angel, “You cannot change the past, but you can heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it with the vision of Magic Eyes.” So the man asked for the gift of Magic Eyes and when he was able to see through them, a pebble was removed from his heart. He felt his heart grow lighter and lighter, and as his spirits lifted, his wife changed before his eyes. She became beautiful and ever so dear to him. This fable demonstrates the process we go through as we learn forgiveness.

Now, I have to tell you that I find it very ironic that my sermon topic this week was forgiveness, because I was presented with a perfect opportunity to be bitter, angry and unforgiving. Last Tuesday evening around 9:00 we got a call at home that the security alarm here at church was going off. So Fred and I came over here, assuming it was another false alarm, which it is 99% of the time. But this was not a false alarm. A man had broken a window in the Youth Room downstairs and entered the building and was in the church office. I saw him briefly, and when he saw me he leaped out of my office window and ran down the street. He was looking for money, probably high on something and made an absolute mess of Milly’s office and my office. Files and papers a foot deep, he pulled out every single drawer from my desk and filing cabinet and tossed the contents on the floor. He cut himself by breaking glass, and blood was absolutely everywhere. It was a mess. Because we walked in on him, he jumped out my office window without taking anything. I was afraid he had taken my computer or the Polish Communion Chalice my husband bought for me, but he didn’t get away with anything. Then, the following evening he broke into the Presbyterian Church at 10th and Brentwood. Their choir director was alone in the building getting ready for rehearsal and he hit her over the head and knocked her out. She was hospitalized and has since been released. The police were convinced it was the same person, who has since been caught and put in jail.

Now, this all turned out for the best, and in the overall scheme of things it is not a big deal. But those of you who have experienced a burglary know how

violated you feel. It will be months before I get things back in order in my office. I have been thinking about that young man, and what sort of world he inhabits. I wonder what experiences brought him to this place. So I now need to work on forgiving him. I do not know his name, and I never saw his face, but that young man is going to be with me for years. Because as I reach for file folders splattered with his blood I hope I will have the grace to say a prayer for him. And perhaps I can remember that Jesus blood was shed for him every bit as much as it was shed for me. I need to see him with Magic Eyes, instead of the eyes of hate. And I need to reread Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* for the story of Jean Val Jean is the most moving account of the transformative power of forgiveness I have ever seen.

For several days last week, I wanted that young man to suffer. Retribution feels so satisfying. Such was the case for Frank and Elizabeth Morris after their only son was killed by a drunk driver named Tommy Paige. Driving blind drunk, he hit Joey Morris head on after his car veered into oncoming traffic. Frank and Elizabeth dedicated their lives to punishing the young man who took their only child from them. Elizabeth told the New York Times: "We wanted him in prison," then corrected herself, "No, we wanted him dead. There was nothing too horrible for him." For three years they hounded the young man who killed their son. They monitored his court appearances and spoke at every one of them, they followed him to the county jail, monitored his release, and watched his apartment, trying to catch him in some violation of his probation. None of it brought them any peace or even satisfaction, but only more pain. Finally Elizabeth Morris realized what was happening to her. "The hatred I had for him was destroying me," she said. She realized that without forgiveness Tommy Paige would control their lives forever. They would be carrying him on their backs, unwilling to put him down. Frank and Elizabeth Morris realized that they had to forgive Tommy Paige in order to save themselves. They went to hear him speak to a high school assembly about drunk driving as a condition of his probation. They expected him to be defensive and smug, but instead they heard him take full responsibility for his actions and talking about how deeply he regretted what he had done. Later Elizabeth Morris said, "I actually felt sorry for him. I decided I needed to help him because he had already destroyed one very special life. I did not want to see this destroy his life too." They were able to see the young man who had killed their only son with Magic Eyes, and at that moment they were free. Their care for him filled a little part of the hole left by the death of their son.

Ghandi was right when he said, "If we try to live by the principle of an eye for an eye, soon the whole world will be blind." Sometimes you just have to step out of the cycle of retribution, and that is what Jesus was talking about when he

told Peter we need to forgive endlessly. Lack of forgiveness imprisons us in the past and prevents us from growing in faith, hope and love. Forgiveness liberates not only the person who wronged us, but ourselves. It is a gift we give ourselves. Philip Yancey writes of a Jewish rabbi who made this astonishing statement: “Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolph Hitler because I did not want to bring Hitler inside of me to my new country.” (*What’s So Amazing About Grace*, p. 99) Forgiving one who has wronged you is a gift you give yourself.

There are so many other examples of people who do forgiveness right, and they are our teachers. They see with Magic Eyes all the time. Such is the case with the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, who had to deal with the horror of the school shootings of October 2006. The slaughter of five schoolgirls and the wounding of five others — by a gunman who then shot himself — was an unimaginable trauma, for any community, but especially for a deeply religious, nonviolent people like the Amish. The world watched to see how the elders of this radically pacifist community would respond. What we saw was a remarkable Christian witness. One of the first things the Amish did was to reach out to the gunman’s widow, and her children. They brought them food. They raised money to help them pay their bills (for, on top of everything else, that family had lost its principal wage-earner). They surrounded them with a circle of care and forgiveness.

Then ten days after the shootings, a bulldozer crashed through the walls of the Amish schoolhouse at Nickel Mines. Anyone familiar with the Amish knows bulldozers aren’t their style. They don’t use that kind of machinery — and, besides, they’re a thrifty bunch. When demolishing a building, they typically descend upon it with nail-pullers and crowbars, laboriously salvaging as much of the lumber and nails as they can. It’s the opposite of one of their famous barn-raising. Yet, on this occasion, the Amish hired an outside, non-Amish contractor to drive his bulldozer through the building, reducing it to splinters. They wanted the world to see that they were absolutely determined to forgive and forget: and quickly. To them, that public witness was well worth the cost of hiring the bulldozer and giving up the scrap lumber. Although they would not forget, they forgave completely and without hesitation.

Like our Amish sisters and brothers, we must work hard at forgiving others. But equally difficult is accepting forgiveness for ourselves. I have found that many people are unbelievably hard on themselves, and often cannot let go of the wrongs they have committed, long after others have forgiven them. But only when we can receive forgiveness for ourselves can we give it to others. Can the damage that we have done over the years be fully repaired, the cruel words retracted, the mistakes

erased, the betrayals obliterated, the failures reversed and the long list of selfish and sinful acts wiped clean? No. Not by our own efforts. It usually requires the help of a God who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Freedom from shame and guilt never comes from doing, but from being; not from law, but from grace; not by works, but by faith. We are invited to accept the grace of a God who truly wants to free us from the burden of our guilt. We are told that we can access this gift of forgiveness through genuine repentance and faith. There is a way to be good again that is the heart of Christianity. It's all about being in relationship, receiving grace and growing in faith. Ours is a God who always meets us where we are, but never leaves us there.

So this Scripture lesson from Matthew about forgiving endlessly teaches us that forgiveness is a two way street, extending to others the same grace we have received for ourselves. It is not a get out of jail free card, however. We must take responsibility for our actions to be set free from the past. Our capacity to forgive makes us Godlike, distinguishes us from lower forms of life. When we have been sorely wronged, we need to pray for Magic Eyes, the ability to see others through the eyes of love. Ultimately forgiveness is a gift that we give to ourselves, while we simultaneously liberate the one who has wronged us. Forgiveness is hard work, but as one writer put it: "The only thing harder than forgiveness is the alternative." May God continue to forgive all of us for the ways we have failed and fallen short, as we endlessly forgive those who sin against us. Amen.