

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 6:10

Title: “The Prayer of Jesus: As We Forgive”

It’s been about 15 years ago now, but I remember the experience vividly. I was late. There was to be a meeting in Fairgrove at the UMC where Penny Parkin is now serving as pastor. I’d never been there before. Someone had given me directions that I’d committed to memory. Rushing, I drove into town. Came to the stop sign going east. Went straight. After passing about four houses it was clear I was already outside of town. Fields all around. I wasn’t where I was supposed to be, so I turned around and headed back west. I was very preoccupied that day. About what I can’t recall, but I remember like it was yesterday what happened next. I came to the stop sign. Didn’t see it. Thought I looked for oncoming traffic. Pulled out and turned left without stopping. In a flash there was a car behind me tight to my bumper. He didn’t back off. A young man, bouncing with anger, flipping hands and finger signals, only one of which I understood and it wasn’t good. Kept driving south with this car on my tail. Its angry driver motioning me to pull over.

Why should I pull over? It seemed a crazy thing to do. The guy might have a gun or a bat or a knife. I’ve read the stories of people who’ve been hurt by irate drivers. But in this instance I knew I was wrong. I missed the stop sign and pulled out in front of him. Granted it was a mistake, but it was mine, not his. Still, pulling over would be risky. Why should I take such a risk?

When we are in conflict with someone, it’s not always clear what forgiveness looks like. It’s not always clear how to approach someone with whom we may be angry or someone who may be angry with us as a result of being hurt. Why did Jesus make forgiveness one of the key parts of his prayer: “Forgive us our debts or trespasses as we forgive our debtors or those who trespass against us?” Easy to say them. We say them every week in the early service. But what do they really mean?

Jesus talked a lot about forgiveness. Later in Matthew’s Gospel, he tells a parable about it after Peter asks him how many times he should forgive. Peter suggests a number: seven times. But Jesus ups the ante and tells him 77 times in one translation, 70 times 7 in another. The message is pretty clear: forgiveness isn’t about counting, according to Jesus. Are we all going to keep a list of people with a number next to their name indicating how many times we have forgiven them? Forgiveness is a way of life.

Then Jesus goes on to share this parable:

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[c] 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:[d] 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 would 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?’ 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister[e] from your heart.”

One man owes his master the equivalent of 150,000 years’ wages for a laborer. At \$7.25 per hour minimum wage that equals \$2,262,000,000. That’s how much Jesus says he owes. It’s a ridiculous number. He could never repay it. It’s impossible. But the king in his mercy and graciousness forgives him after he begs for his and his family’s lives. The debt has been erased. The weight of it is gone. He is free.

You would think that this gift would so overwhelm him that the man’s gratitude would overflow. You would think he’d be able to celebrate the gift with his family and friends. Maybe have a party of some sort to enjoy the freedom he had just received, especially when it’s clear that he and his family could have been sold into slavery in order to partially satisfy what he owed. But that’s not how this man handled his gift. Instead, he looks up a friend who owes him 100 denarii which sources tell me amounts to 100 days’ wages for a laborer—3.5 months—about \$5,800 with today’s minimum wage. When he confronts the debtor and demands payment just as the king had done for him, the debtor begged for time, for patience, just as he had done with the king. But he wasn’t as merciful as was the king. His hard heart led him to have him thrown into debtors’ prison. The man wasted the gift of generous forgiveness he received by not paying it forward. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors may have come from his lips but they did not take shape in the way he lived his life.

Jesus calls us in this parable to be gentler with each other, to recognize that no one goes without fault, without error, without mistake. All of us are indebted. All of us. As God extends God’s mercy, so we are called to extend it to those who trespass against us. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

When I was being tailed by that angry driver in Fairgrove that day, the conditions causing me to pull over I can't honestly recall. I had never done this before or since. I would not do this every time a driver was angry with me, and I'm not recommending that you do it. In fact, this was the only time I've ever done it. I don't remember all the conditions leading to my pulling over, but I do remember thinking I just didn't want to have one more unresolved issue floating around in my mind. I felt led by the Spirit to pull over. Maybe it was the stories on the news of the rise of road rage. Maybe it was the prolonged rhetoric of the Gulf War at the time and the sustained conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Maybe it was an overload of personal conflicts at that particular moment I don't remember. I do remember thinking however that I was wrong and for some reason I felt the strong need to tell this guy I was sorry. This was one conflict that I had some control over resolving. In retrospect I think it was the Lord putting it on my heart.

So I pulled over. Rolled my window down. Put both hands high on the steering wheel, so he could see I had nothing with which to hurt him and didn't intend to do so. Decided to stay in the car because I didn't want to be tackled either. He sat in his car a few seconds. I wasn't sure he was going to get out. My heart was pounding. Tense. I watched my mirrors. His door opened. He walked toward me. A firm, determined walk. Came up to my door. His breathing was shallow because he was scared too. Pointed his right index finger at me and used a variety of expletives I'd not heard used in one sentence in my lifetime. He just chained profanity together like I'd never heard before. Told me, "Don't you ever pull out in front of somebody like that again! You could have killed both of us!" he screamed.

"I know. You're right." I said, "I am very sorry. I was wrong."

He started to calm down. "If my Dad were here he'd be kicking your 'expletive' right now! It was somebody like you who killed my mother." He said.

"Your mother was killed in an auto accident?" I asked.

"Yes, some 'expletive' like you was drunk and slammed into her car and killed her."

"It's no wonder you're so angry. You have every right to be. How long ago did this happen?"

"About 3 years ago." He said. "You could have just repeated that for two families."

"I know. You're absolutely right, and I am very sorry. I was wrong. It's no excuse but I was in a rush and preoccupied with getting where I was going."

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm supposed to be at a meeting at the UMC and I can't seem to find it. Do you know where it is?"

He gave me directions and finished our conversation with, "Please, just be more careful next time."

"I will," I assured him, "Thank you for your help."

I can't tell you how that experience affected that young man, but I do know I felt lighter that day, freer, released. This was one conflict that wouldn't be rolling around in my mind and heart, wouldn't be churning in my gut the rest of the day. And as I have reflected on that moment by the side of the road, I am convinced the Spirit of God created the conditions for my pulling over. It was a crazy thing to do. It could have just as easily resulted in a shooting or a fist to the side of the head. It was a crazy thing to do, something –again– I'm not recommending ought to be done. I never did it again. It's almost as crazy as a king forgiving the unpayable debt of one of his servants.

All that being said, what about when forgiveness is offered so freely and readily that its meaning is cheapened to the point of losing value? Should an abused child simply forgive an abusing adult, the family of an addict overlook the destructive behavior of their loved one?

*“Unlimited forgiveness is not to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior.” [says Douglas Hare, in Interpretation commentary.]
“Christians are often guilty of forgiving too much and too quickly. The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. Teenagers who betray their parents trust are not simply to be forgiven; a much more loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so that they can regain that trust. In these and other instances premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help the offender or to heal a damaged relationship. (Interpretation, Douglas R.A. Hare, p. 218)*

It’s one thing to forgive someone for pulling out in front of you on the road. It’s quite another to forgive one who has spent all your life savings on a gambling addiction, or to forgive when loved ones have been killed. The depth of the wound changes the ease with which forgiveness can be extended or received.

Forgiveness does not come easy. It is a costly experience, and it can take time. It can also be risky to seek forgiveness from someone else and risky to extend forgiveness to someone else. It might cost us our anger. It might cost us our resentments. It may even literally cost us money in forgiving a literal debt. Yet, it’s clear that Jesus’ invitation time and again is to extend mercy even as it has been extended to us. One commentator said when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone, it was like asking Jesus how many times he should love someone. It’s not a counting game. It’s a way of life, a way of being in relationship. The cross itself symbolizes God’s way of being in relationship. “Kill me. I will yet love you. Betray me. I will yet trust you again.”

“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?” asked the king.

So I’m wondering is there someone you need to forgive this morning? Is there someone who has hurt you, someone who owes you something, someone who needs your forgiveness? Can you find a way in your own heart to pay forgiveness forward without making it cheap forgiveness?

In as much as we are able, we are called to be gracious with one another. For all of us have all fallen short of the glory of God. When we are able to offer authentic forgiveness, it frees us too. It frees us from our own anger, our own resentments, our own bitterness. Forgiveness frees us which is why I think Jesus made it part of his prayer: “Forgive us as we forgive others.”

This next hymn we sang about a month ago. It’s not a common or popular hymn. Yet it has something to say about forgiveness that is worthy of hearing. It’s number 390 and I invite

you to turn there. The first verse uses the Lord's Prayer request that we be forgiven as we forgive and that we need God's grace in order to really live this way. In verse two, the prayer speaks of the "unforgiving heart that broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart." Verse 3 we hear gratitude for the gift of Christ's gift on the cross, Jesus who gave the ultimate gift and how much we owe him as a result of that profound gift of life. And finally verse 4 concludes the prayer asking God to cleanse us and rid our hearts of resentments so that we will experience the kind of love that binds us together and empowers us to live our lives in ways that spread God's peace.